

INVISIBLE WOUNDS OF WAR:
THE IMPACT OF MILITARY AND CIVILIAN COMMUNICATION ON SOLDIER
MENTAL HEALTH

by

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Abstract

As soldiers and veterans return home from war, mental illnesses such as PTSD and moral injury can follow military personnel into civilian life. Throughout history, how society portrays or handles these invisible wounds of war greatly varies. When soldiers and veterans return to a society which may not understand the implications of war, military personnel can feel further isolated and in turn this can create a barrier to seeking professional help when needed. By analyzing the communication gap between soldiers, veterans, and civilians, and utilizing documentaries as a guide, a better understanding of how documentaries can serve as a bridge between these groups can be established. Using studies focused on personal narratives, visual and audio communication, and perceptions surrounding mental illness, this study shows how documentaries can serve as a crucial channel between the military and civilians and create a positive, lasting change to comprehend military life.

This thesis attempts to advance an understanding of how documentaries can enact individual and social change through the lens of fantasy-theme theory, cultivation theory, and symbolic convergence theory. Using case-study research and analyzing the documentaries *Restrepo*, *Korengal*, *Brothers At War*, *Lioness*, and *Trauma* for collective themes, the potential impact for individual and social perceptions to change is explored as the restitution and chaos narrative is challenged. After analyzing interviews and footage from the documentaries, it was discovered war is both a personal and individualized experience but shares core commonalities, first hand documentaries can break the restitution and chaos narrative by showing an emotional side to war and challenging stereotypes, visual and audio narratives create interactive storylines for understanding, and civilians do not have a strong understanding military life and military roles. This thesis explores in detail why and how gaps in communication between military

personnel and civilians can occur and how medical and communication professionals can assist in closing these gaps through careful analysis and constructive messaging.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the servicemen and servicewomen who are serving or have served their country and to my mama for her love, support, and always believing in me.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: Literature Review	7
Soldier and Veteran Perspective on War and Service	7
Soldier and Veteran Perspective on Mental Illness	9
Transition to Military Life	12
Need for Trauma Sensitive Language	15
Storytelling and Documentaries	17
Narratives and Mental Illness	20
Reaching the Target Audience	21
Theories and Documentaries	23
Desensitizing of Violence and Trauma	24
Chapter Three: Research Design and Method	25
Data	25
Rhetorical Criticism	28
Fantasy-theme Analysis and Cultivation Theory	29
Symbolic Convergence Theory	30
Coding Process	31
Chapter 4: Results	33
Introduction	33
Theme 1: Military Life and Sacrifice	34
<i>Daily Soldier Life and Responsibilities</i>	34
<i>Reasons to Serve</i>	38
<i>Family and Personal Sacrifice</i>	40
Theme 2: Relations with the Locals	43
Theme 3: Adjustment to Civilian Life and the Communication Gap	46
<i>Avoidance in Communication About Deployment</i>	46
<i>Post Deployment Life</i>	48
<i>Civilian Misunderstanding</i>	49
Theme 4: Unbroken Bonds of Comradery	50
<i>Lasting Family Bonds</i>	50
<i>Loss of a Fellow Soldier</i>	52
Theme 5: Lasting Traumas of War and Coping	54
<i>Brutality of War</i>	54
<i>Moral Injury</i>	56
<i>Post Traumatic Stress Disorder</i>	59
Emotional, Mental, and Physical Symptoms	59
Witnessing Death	62

Table of Contents Continued

Seeking Medical Help	64
Chapter 5: Discussion	67
Summary	67
Research Question 1	69
Research Question 2	75
Research Question 3	78
Limitations	83
Future Research	83
Conclusion	84
References	85
Bibliography	92

Introduction

Soldiers and veterans have long been the center of debate regarding mental illness such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and moral injury (Levinson, 2015). Though the terminology for PTSD and moral injury has changed over time, its significant impact on soldier and veteran mental health remains the same. According to Loughran (2012), post-traumatic stress disorder is the “exposure to an ‘extreme traumatic stressor’ such as personal experience of risk of death or injury or witnessing the death or injury of another person” (p. 198). The side-effects of post-traumatic stress disorder are: “intense anxiety, nightmares, hyperarousal, and flashbacks that are triggered by exposure to traumatic external events” (Dombo, 2013, p. 198). Additionally, Dombo states that moral injury is the cause of PTSD and occurs when one violates “deeply held moral beliefs” and experiences “deeply disturbing emotional reactions” (p. 198). As soldiers and veterans return home from war, these mental illnesses can impact their daily lives and the way they communicate with civilians. The implications of these two illnesses and the impact it has on soldier, veteran, and civilian communication will be explored in more detail.

Post-traumatic stress disorder and moral injury can be traced as far back as Homer’s poems, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, which according to Levinson (2015) “are filled with descriptions of war-related psychological damage” (p. 258). Loughran (2012) also states that dating back as far as World War I, soldiers who exhibited “nervous” tendencies after war were diagnosed with “shell-shock,” in which doctors “understood in many different ways: as a psychological reaction to war, as a type of concussion, or as a physiological response to prolonged fear” (p. 107). A famous incident in which an American general, General Patterson, slapped a soldier exhibiting symptoms of trauma is often cited to show the lack of understanding at the time surrounding postwar mental illness. Today, “shell-shock” is referred to as PTSD.

According to Levinson (2015), it wasn't until after the Vietnam War that PTSD was taken seriously and "the medical world acknowledged PTSD as a legitimate medical disorder by listing it in the *DSM-III*" (p. 259). Levinson stated this was "largely because of the efforts of Vietnam veterans (and other veterans who have served in subsequent conflicts)" (p. 259). As doctors and psychologists begin to understand more about PTSD and moral injury, the concepts of the "isolated storyteller" (Murphy, 2008), ingratiating soldiers back into civilian life, and improving how society communicates about war illnesses becomes the central focus.

To fully understand the implications of military and civilian communication on a soldier's mental health, one must understand the pre-existing narratives society constructs for soldiers and veterans. According to Ma and Nan (2018), since society is naturally inclined to storytelling, narratives serve to open communication between soldiers, veterans, and civilians. Murphy (2008) explains how PTSD research is more focused on a "mental disease perspective" without consideration of "a social constructive perspective" (p. 4). Referred to as the "isolated storyteller", Murphy further elaborates on the concept by referencing the restitution narrative and the chaos narrative in conjunction with the "strong and silent patriot" or "the wartime veteran [who] is the homeless, battered, and wounded soldier" (p. 7). In the restitution narrative, "the individual views illness as temporary, with the goal of returning to normal" (p. 7). The chaos narrative "portrays the sufferer as out of control...as though there is no end in [sight] and that the sufferer will learn nothing to spin the condition in a positive light" (p.7). Murphy claims, "We often imagine a soldier with PTSD as telling this story, yet, we believe that therapy and medication will move this narrative to restitution" or in the case of a quest narrative the illness is viewed "as the opportunity to find deeper meaning in life" (p.7). Murphy also states that portraying either the soldier as brave and unaffected by war or as the damaged hero greatly

influences civilians' perceptions on soldier mental illnesses and can even create barriers to providing soldiers and veterans with the adequate healthcare they need. By believing each case of PTSD and trauma can be resolved by medication and treatment, the soldier becomes an isolated storyteller whom everyone is trying to fix. Analyzing mental illness from the soldier's perspective allows for a more organic representation of PTSD and moral injury in order to give voice to those who are affected.

Another narrative concept afflicted on soldiers is the "broken hero". According to Phillips (2015), the "broken hero" implies all soldiers suffer from mental illness and need help when some merely want to integrate back into society. As cited by Phillips, Army helicopter pilot, Chris Marvin, explained "the way veterans are portrayed on the screen is the way they will be thought of in the living room and the way they will be treated in the community" (para. 8). Although soldiers and veterans can suffer from PTSD, not all soldiers fit into the media's portrayal of the "broken hero" or the depictions of "veterans as berserk because of post-traumatic stress disorder or as emotionally shaky and struggling with drugs and alcohol" (par. 11). Since each war experience is unique, there is a need for larger representations of soldiers who merely want to adapt back into society (para. 10). Stereotypes in the media can be damaging as there are soldiers who may be insulted by the "broken hero" stereotype and want to be treated as regular citizens.

The use of visual communication, specifically in documentaries, can help bridge the soldier and veteran narrative with personal experience by providing actual insights into the experiences soldiers and veterans face during war. Offering visual "facts in flesh and blood", documentaries provide a unique way for soldiers and veterans to connect with viewers face-to-face in an authentic manner without having to be physically present (Bazin, 2001, p. 62).

Documentary popularity is also on the rise. According to Mintz (2005), “in 2004, box office receipts might have declined had it not been for documentaries, which grossed over \$170 million” (p. 10). Aufderheide (2007) states “by 2004 the worldwide business in television documentary alone added up to \$4.5 billion revenues annually”; showing documentaries are a possible up-and-coming communication channel to broadcast important information regarding soldier and veteran life (p. 4). It is important to note, however, documentaries can be subjective. According to Aufderheide (2007), “documentaries are *about* real life; they are not real life” (p. 2). This distinction is important since multiple people such as producers, editors, and interviewers are involved when creating a documentary; adding their own interpretations to the film. Aufderheide states that while “viewers certainly shape the meaning of any documentary...we do expect that the documentary will be a fair and honest representation of somebody’s experience of reality” (p. 2-3). For this reason, there are many ethical implications of documentaries.

To prevent receiving misinformation, it is important to be conscious consumers of media. According to Best (2015), when viewing a documentary, one must realize “experience is always mediated” and the angle in which a documentary is filmed also makes an impact (p. 4-7). Best explains when filmed from an aerial angle, the war seems more distant while “for those on the ground, the targets of bomb showers and exploding projectiles, the danger, horror, and blood of the experience is extremely present” (p. 4). Additionally, Coffman (2009) claims in documentaries “the danger is that the filmmaker may remain the real author with the participants simply being brought in to legitimate a collaborative rubber stamp” (p. 5). Coffman also states, “if you have too much empathy for your subject, and you ‘give away’ too much content or equipment control, you will sacrifice objectivity and the overall quality and distribution of a

piece” (pg. 13). By recognizing the need to consume media carefully, civilians can gain a better understanding of how mental illness affects soldiers and veterans through documentaries.

From viewing PTSD and moral injury as a sign of weakness in WWI to setting up Veteran Affairs (VA) programs for soldiers to seek professional help, the way mental illnesses are perceived and treated has evolved (Loughran, 2012). While PTSD and moral injury is addressed differently in the present, there are still many communication barriers between soldiers, veterans, and civilians; namely the lack of understanding about the traumas and experiences of war. According to a 2013 Pew poll, “67% of the public believed that mental illness was an extremely or very serious public health problem” (Roper Center, 2017, para. 4). However, in a Pew Research Center study that analyzes the gap between civilians and the military force, “84 percent of veterans believe the rest of the country has little or no understanding of the problems faced by the military. Seventy-one percent of the public shares that assessment” (Ukman, 2011, para. 2).

Although not all soldiers or veterans may suffer from moral injury or post-traumatic stress disorder, the way people communicate with soldiers and veterans is crucial to avoid enforcing damaging stereotypes and making integration back into civilian life more difficult. This study will examine the invisible wounds of war, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and moral injury, in relation to the impact military and civilian communication has on a soldier or veteran’s mental health. The following research questions are explored in more detail throughout the study; (1) what common themes are established through the military lens of soldier and veteran perspectives, (2) how do military documentaries offer personal insight into soldier and veteran lives, and (3) based on the common themes established what proactive steps can civilians take to better soldier, veteran, and civilian communication. To avoid misinterpretations of soldier and veteran comments and narratives, documentaries which include first-hand accounts of

soldier experiences were used to evaluate how soldiers and veterans discuss mental illnesses and to determine how soldiers and veterans communicate to civilians at large.

Fantasy-theme theory, cultivation theory, and symbolic convergence theory were used as a framework for the study. According to Bormann (1972), fantasy-theme theory recognizes how “group fantasizing” correlates to “individual fantasizing”; meaning individuals relate their experiences to others (p. 396). Cultivation theory explains how the more people consume media, the more likely they believe what they see on television is reality (Mastro & Tukachinsky, 2012, p. 337). Finally, symbolic convergence theory allows scholars to categorize shared experiences into concrete terms using symbolic cues (Bormann, 1985). Using a collective case study method, this study analyzed five first-hand account documentaries; *Restrepo*, *Korengal*, *Lioness*, *Brothers At War*, and *Trauma*. The goal of this study was to examine these documentaries through fantasy-theme theory, cultivation theory, and symbolic convergence theory to gain a better understanding of how communication and medical professionals can bridge the gap between soldier, veteran, and civilian communication using these first-hand accounts. Each documentary was analyzed for themes, insight into soldier and veteran life, and ways civilians can be proactive in bridging the military and civilian gap. Using direct quotes from the soldiers and veterans in the documentaries, a content analysis was conducted for key words and phrases to measure how well these core messages were communicated within the documentary.

This study is significant in understanding how civilians can create support systems for returning soldiers and veterans and if societal perceptions need adaptation. The results of the study will aid health professionals, communication practitioners, and civilians in the ways they speak to soldiers and veterans and help to avoid enforcing damaging self-perceptions or deterring soldiers and veterans from seeking professional help for mental illnesses.

Literature Review

Soldier and Veteran Perspective on War and Service

When analyzing the gap between soldiers, veterans, and civilians, it is crucial to first understand a soldier and veteran's perspective on war and service. In a Pew Research study (2011) conducted to identify "the military-civilian gap war and sacrifice in the post-9/11 era", a sample of 1,853 veterans were surveyed for their thoughts on service, life after service, and military mental illnesses. A total of 1,134 veterans surveyed served before 9/11, 712 served after 9/11 with 336 serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, and seven did not specify. According to the study, "an overwhelming majority of veterans are proud of their service (96%) and eight-in-ten feel they did important work for their country" (p. 31). While half of the veterans stated military life put strains on their spousal relationships and relationships with their children, 60% said it helped them financially (p. 31). Many veterans also stated the military helped them to mature, they felt a strong sense of pride serving their country, it gave them self-confidence, and they were more likely to recommend someone to enlist in the military than someone who has not served (War and Sacrifice, 2011).

The Pew Research study discovered, however, "exposure to casualties" had a "profound impact on a veteran's emotional wellbeing" as those who experienced war first-hand showed higher tendencies of PTSD (War and Sacrifice, 2011, p. 43). While many veterans stated the military helped them get ahead in life, combat veterans experienced greater difficulty adjusting to civilian life. According to the study, "among post-9/11 veterans who served in combat, 76% say their military experienced helped them get ahead, yet half (51%) say they had some difficulty readjusting to civilian life" (p. 47). About half (52%) of the combat veterans "also say they had emotionally traumatic or distressing experiences while in the military...three-in-four say they

still reliving them in the form of flashbacks or nightmares” (p. 1). It was additionally discovered in the study “nearly four-in-ten (37%) post 9/11 veterans say that, whether or not they were formally diagnosed, they believe they have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder...among veterans who served prior to 9/11, just 16% say the same” (p. 1). Although some researchers speculate post-traumatic stress disorder is more visible in post 9/11 veterans because there was less stigmas around military mental illnesses during the Iraq and Afghanistan war, more research is needed in this field to better understand the varying reports of PTSD in veterans from various wars.

When asked about how PTSD impacts their lives, “only 15% say they are very happy with their life overall” compared to “37% of veterans who have not suffered from PTSD” (War and Sacrifice, 2011, p. 54). This further effects veteran health as “only 4% of veterans who have suffered from PTSD say they are currently in excellent health” compared to “39% of their fellow veterans who have not faced this challenge” (p. 54). Additionally, the perception of government aid to veterans is also affected. According to the Pew Research study, “among post-9/11 veterans who say they have suffered from PTSD as a result of their experiences in the military, only 30% say the government has done all it should to help them” while 63% of veterans who do not suffer from PTSD “give the government positive marks” (p. 56). The symptoms of PTSD further impact a veteran’s employment opportunities as “post-9/11 veterans who carry with them emotional scars from their service are among the least likely to be working full time” (p. 58). Only 48% of those with traumatic experiences are working fulltime while 62% of those without PTSD work fulltime (p. 58). Since PTSD affects all aspects of a veteran’s life including relationships with spouses and children, their quality of life, and employment opportunities, it is crucial the gap between soldiers, veterans, and civilian communication is lessened to better

integrate military personnel back into civilian life and create a greater understanding about the internal struggles soldiers and veterans may be facing.

Soldier and Veteran Perspective on Mental Illness

Although not every civilian may interact with a soldier or veteran every day, most people know someone who has served and can relate to the concept of soldier and veteran mental health. The rise of technology has also made people more accessible; making communication access between civilians, soldiers, and veterans easier than before. In the past, WWI and WWII veterans would discuss the implications of post-traumatic stress disorder through poetry. This offered an insight into the many struggles soldiers and veterans faced during the war. Presently, however, soldiers, veterans and civilians believe there is a civilian-military gap (Ukman, 2011, para. 2). This disconnect can make it difficult for civilians to understand what a soldier or veteran needs when arriving home and make the soldier or veteran's simulation back into civilian life more difficult. According to a Pew Research study (2011), it has been found "[r]oughly 44 percent of post-9/11 veterans say their readjustment to civilian life was difficult" and only "25 percent of veterans who served in earlier eras said the same" (p. 1). By acknowledging there is a gap between civilian and military personnel, researchers can begin analyzing the cause for this disconnect and how it directly effects communication between civilians, soldiers, and veterans.

To fully understand the gap between soldier, veteran, and civilian communication, one must understand how soldiers and veterans view PTSD and moral injury. One major component of understanding a soldier's perspective on mental illness is trust; especially when a soldier or veteran reaches out to a medical practitioner. According to Bohnert, Zivin, Welsh, and Kilbourne (2011), "patient-provider communication is complex" as interactions may be unequal, mandated, and emotional as it requires both parties to work together (p. 267). One common model used for

those who suffer from mental illness is the biomedical model. Tending to “attribute dysfunction, discomfort and other abnormalities to chemical or physical problems associated with the body... this model divides the patient’s body from her mind” (Murphy, 2008, p. 9). The model, however, “does not recognize that what happens to the body has a direct effect on the mind” (p. 9). As communication between the medical provider and military personnel becomes distorted and needs are not accurately met, trust can be impacted. In the study conducted by Bohnert et al. (2011), distrust in a provider led to patients rating communication between the patient and provider poorly and was “significantly greater for VA patients with a SMI [serious mental illness] or SUD [substance use disorder] diagnosis than those without” (p. 267). It was further found those with SUDs feared stigmas associated with SUD and therefore had a harder time establishing trust with a provider (p. 268). As trust becomes impacted, it becomes harder for soldiers and veterans to seek, or ask for, the help they may need and integrate back into society without fearing mental illness stigmas.

In a study conducted by Ferrajão and Oliveira (2014), the notion of viewing PTSD and moral injury from a veteran’s perspective is further analyzed. Sampling 60 Portuguese war veterans, 30 currently experiencing PTSD and 30 in remission, the study analyzes “the role of moral injury, self-awareness or mental states, self-integration of moral injury in personal schemas, and perceived social on the severity of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression symptoms” (p. 277). From the sample, it was discovered those who recovered had “high self-awareness of mental states, self-integration of moral injury in personal schemas, perceived social support, and lower frequencies of moral injury” than those who did not recover (p. 278). Additionally, participants who expressed “low self-awareness of mental states” and “low self-integration of moral injury...would report higher severity of both PTSD and depression

symptoms” compared to those who expressed high self-awareness and high self-integration (p. 278). This study shows the positive impact of allowing a soldier and veteran to engage hands-on with their recovery while integrating back into society.

It is also extremely crucial to consider the soldier or veteran’s personal perspective on their own mental health and the type of communication which is expected. According to a study conducted by Howren, Cozad, and Kaboli, out of a sample of 315 veterans 47.3% believed “it was primarily their responsibility to either directly communicate or facilitate communication between their Veterans Affairs (VA) and non-VA providers” (p. 838). Additionally, “only 11.3% reported that it should be the responsibility of their VA provider, 19.6% believed that their non-VA provider should be responsible, and 7.3% believed both should be involved” (p. 838). Only “14.4% believed another person was responsible, such as a system administrator or patient representative” (p. 838). 61.7% of patients who expressed healthcare was their responsibility stated, “they preferred active involvement in their health care” (p. 838). Although the study focuses primarily on veteran’s communication with health-care providers, it offers insight into how soldiers and veterans presently view their healthcare responsibilities and the involvement of communication in dealing with mental illness. Howren et al. believes “patients should be involved in the process of communicating between VA and non-VA entities, or at least have the option if they so choose” (p. 839). According to Howren et al., including soldiers and veterans in the process allows more open communication about mental illness and how everyone is affected. The analysis found “that of the persons believing that they were responsible for communication reading dual use, a majority (61.7% n = 92) indicated that they felt this way because they preferred direct involvement with their care” (p. 840). This desire for direct involvement shows soldiers and veterans directly want to be involved in the progress of mental illness and should be

involved in processes dealing with the creation of open communication between soldiers, veterans, and civilians. Eventually, the hope is to create well informed civilian support groups for soldiers. Although it may seem rational to include soldiers and veterans in this process, it is important to know there is a desire to be involved to avoid assumptions and accurately reflect the desire of those affected by PTSD and moral injury to not impose upon a sensitive topic.

Transition to Civilian Life

As soldiers and veterans begin integrating from military life to civilian life, the difference between these two lifestyles and the stigmas they may face from PTSD and moral injury make the transition more difficult. Recent “studies have shown that the transition to civilian life for Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) veterans who served in combat can be particularly difficult, with over 50 percent describing the readjustment to civilian life as a ‘real struggle’ (Morin, 2011a)” (Pease, Billera, & Gerard, 2016, pg. 83). The contrast of military and civilian culture can often make soldiers and veterans feel isolated as a more individualized society lacks the comradery of military life and the close bonds established (p. 84). The distances between military and civilian life “can potentially foster feelings of separateness when veterans transition to civilian life if the particular circumstances are such that they lack a sufficient support system, or if they lack a shared experience with those systems” (p. 84). As soldiers and veterans feel a lack of understanding and isolation from the life they once lived, the need for support groups becomes especially prominent as 20 veterans commit suicide a day (Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, 2018). Breaking down mental illness stigmas could be the first step toward developing open communication. In a Pew Research Center survey, it was “suggested that veterans who have been diagnosed with PTSD are more likely to have difficulties reintegrating compared with veterans who do not experience PTSD

symptoms (Morin, 2011b)” (Pease, Billera, & Gerard, 2016, p. 83). If soldiers and veterans have a safe space to talk about how they feel and know they will not be judged, perhaps one can gain a better understanding of the dilemmas soldiers face post-war.

Research has also been conducted on the dilemmas families face when a soldier or veteran returns home from war and tries to seek help. By understanding the problems families face, insight can be gained on how civilians interact with soldiers and veterans and the ways in which communication is working or present communication falls short. According to a study conducted by Wilson, Gettings, Hall, and Pastor (2015), key issues military members face are recognizing there is a problem without feeling abnormal, seeking help without feeling weak, “being patient and persistent”, and wanting to open up without civilians claiming they understand (p. 772). In the study, eight family members of returning service members read scenarios in which a soldier showed symptoms of PTSD and created goals and outlined barriers they may encounter (Wilson et al., 2015). When analyzing strategies to foster open communication, concepts such as when to talk, how to talk, how to frame it, and where else to turn were established.

While family members may have a more personal perspective on how mental illness affects soldiers and veterans, it is a base point to establish an understanding on how civilians view military mental illness from a non-military lens. Many times, there are gaps in understanding or confusion since family members have not lived through the same experiences as the soldier and her/his comrades. To encourage open communication and discussions, Wilson, Gettings, Hall, and Pastor (2015) suggested “limiting the amount of talk about concerns so as not to cross a ‘threshold’ beyond which the SM would withdraw” (p. 779). It should also be communicated family and friends are “available whenever the SM wanted to do talk, which let

the SM be the one to initiate the topic” (p. 779). It was additionally recommended to emphasize “unconditional caring and commitment to the SM” and to be polite and respectful in order to make the SM feel comfortable and not incompetent or as if demands are being made of them to open up (p. 779). Although these are more personal interactions with a soldier and veteran, these suggestions offer key insights into how one can provide comfort to those with mental illness without being too aggressive in their approach. Equipping civilians with the knowledge on how to handle soldier and veteran mental illness situations is crucial as episodes of PTSD and moral injury can occur at any time. Without an understanding on how to appropriately handle the situation, it can be difficult for a civilian to aid the soldier.

Another aspect to consider is civil-military relations (CMR). According to Owens (2017), civil-military relations “refers broadly to the interaction between the armed force of a state as an institution, and other sectors of the society in which the armed force is embedded” (p. 1). As scholars widely debate the active roles of the military, its societal and cultural influence, and the line between “good” and “bad” relations, one aspect made clear is the many dilemmas found in theories and history on military relations to society (Owens, 2017). Over the course of time, military relations have evolved from “civilian soldiers”, who only served in case of emergencies, to full time soldiers who are serving continuously (Owens, 2017). As these roles continue to change, questions arise on how to integrate and merge the military with society while keeping it strong enough to protect a state but not too strong that it can overthrow the state (Owens, 2017). By acknowledging the wide array of complexities within the actual structure and relation to society itself in the military, one can see how a communication gap between soldiers, veterans, and civilians can develop if even the active roles of the military can be widely debated at large.

Need for Trauma Sensitive Language

One crucial aspect to remember when communicating between soldiers, veterans, and civilians is the need for trauma sensitive language. According to PTSD Speaks Out!, an organization “dedicated to the mission of providing information and resources for the families and sufferers of PTSD, as well as to the community at large”, there is a strong need “to increase awareness of the causes, symptoms and effective therapies now available to treat this very real and potentially devastating illness [PTSD]” (Highlands Hospital and Washington & Jefferson College, PTSD Speaks Out!, 2017). Included on the website is a tab for defining PTSD as well as tabs for veterans, family and friends, and local support. The mission statement of PTSD Speaks Out! and information on the site closely aligns with the goal of creating a safe and welcoming environment for veterans to discuss their tribulations of war and close the gap between soldiers, veterans, and civilians. Included on the PTSD Speaks Out! website is a do’s and don’ts list when interacting with soldiers and veterans. The list includes: listen, ask non-specific questions, spend time together although realize veterans might need time alone, treat veterans with respect, dignity and privacy, be understanding and work together, don’t take it personally if a veteran isn’t ready to open-up and becomes angry, and to please be patient (Highlands Hospital and Washington & Jefferson College, PTSD Speaks Out!, 2017). By creating local support groups for veterans with people they already trust, perhaps veterans can eventually seek the assistance they need if they know they have the people they love behind them and community support.

It is important for family members and friends to also understand a veteran may not want to open up immediately about what he/she has experienced and to instead ask more generic questions such as “What was your experience like?” (Highlands Hospital and Washington &

Jefferson College, PTSD Speaks Out!, 2017). PTSD Speak Out! also encourages family and friends to “listen carefully” while also being “aware that the veteran may be feeling intense grief, guilt or shame and treat him or her with ‘respect, dignity and privacy’” (Highlands Hospital and Washington & Jefferson College, PTSD Speaks Out!, 2017). Creating an environment where open communication is welcomed, and a soldier or veteran can feel safe is crucial as it can help open conversations about military awareness and illnesses one might face from trauma. Having someone to talk to about his/her experiences without pressure can make a soldier or veteran feel more secure and let him/her know he/she has new comrades of support who are willing to help them through dark times.

The concept of trauma sensitive language can further be applied to family and friend-based support groups using general semantics. According to Levinson (2015), “Douglas Kelly, an army psychiatrist and student of general semantics (GS)...used GS to treat over 7,000 soldiers for symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder between 1943 and 1945” (p. 259). Kelley used three key concepts “providing the counselees an explanation of posttraumatic stress disorder, a justification of the treatment employed, and a discussion on overcoming symptoms already present and ways to prevent symptoms that might develop in the future” (p. 260). Levinson states “Kelley believed anyone with sufficient maturity could be taught to run the GS groups, and to help nonpsychiatric worker do that, he gave them mimeographed information on GS” which worked quite well (p. 260). Kelley’s study proves regular individuals can be crucial components in assisting soldier and veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder if they understand the need for trauma sensitive language and know the parameters of soldier and veteran mental illnesses. Using documentaries as a platform to teach these semantics could prove to be extremely beneficial as it can reach a large amount of people in a short amount of time.

Storytelling and Documentaries

To further understand how to bridge the gap between military and civilian communication, one must understand the basis of storytelling in documentaries. Historically, storytelling has allowed human beings to connect with others on deep and meaningful levels. According to Ryan (2015), “oral history, and the relationships between the oral historian and narrator developed through it, can serve as a bridge for communication scholars, deepening our understanding of why humans communicate life stories and meanings found in those tales” (p. 90). Documentaries serve as a form of modern storytelling. Through a concept known as “thick dialogue”, in which the narrator reveals their “motivations and interpretations” in detail, a visual element is added using documentaries (p. 85). According to Ryan, “thick dialogue is transformed in the public sphere through documentary and multimedia storytelling into thick vision” acting as a “way to bring the understanding of the oral history conversation into the larger public sphere...to deepen the audience’s understanding of the story” through both the narrator’s words and visual representation (p. 93). At times this is accomplished through a filming concept known as the “The Interrotron”. According to Williams (2004), “The Interrotron involves a complex system that enables interview subjects to look directly into the camera and therefore directly at the spectator of the film” to create a more personal and direct experience (p. 58). This concept can create a face-to-face illusion and forms a stronger connection between the audience member and the individual speaking.

While there are many positives to documentaries, there are also ethical concerns. One major concern is receiving misinformation or information that has been distorted. According to Aufderheide (2007), “when documentaries deceive us, they are not just deceiving viewers but members of the public who may act upon knowledge gleaned from the film” (p. 4-5).

Additionally, in relation to fantasy-theme theory, cultivation theory, and symbolic convergence theory, “documentaries are part of the media that help us understand not only our world but our role in it, that shape us as public actions” (p. 5). For these reasons, audiences must consume media consciously. According to Mintz (2005), “by their [filmmakers] very choice of subject and their selection of what materials to include and exclude, documentary filmmakers shape the presentation of their subject and therefore convey a political perspective, in term’s broadest sense” (p. 11). While documentaries can give an authentic voice to those who may not otherwise be heard, it is crucial to cross reference sources and ensure the subjects involved in the documentary were not influenced in an unethical manner.

Another component involved in documentaries is the danger which surrounds those recording and how graphic images should be for the intended audience. According to Bazin (2001), “the cameraman runs as many risks as the soldier, whose death he is supposed to film even at the cost of his own life” (p. 60). Why would one risk his life for such footage? Bazin explains “war and the apocalypse it brings are the heart of a decisive new reevaluation of documentary reporting...the reason is that, during a war, facts have an exceptional amplitude and importance” (p. 60). By offering a real-life recap of what happened during war, authentic footage becomes desirable to analyze and justify war actions. For this reason, Coffman (2009) argues “the ‘shoot first, explain later’ approach in film has a necessary place in documentary practices and should not be dropped, as long as filmmakers are conscious of these ethical implications” (p. 4). This leads into the debate whether an individual recording key footage should simply observe or aid in helping during a crisis; leading into a discussion on images relating to violence and tragedy. According to Schwalbe and Silcock (2006), “only 26% of the 35 codes that discuss images address, even in passing, images of tragedy and violence”; further adding grey areas to

how much violence and tragedy audiences should see and what should be kept personal (p. 252). Many scholars argue the need for graphic images no matter how intolerable while others state it violates human decency. While both sides can be debated, Best (2006) explains the power of imagery, as “images do have the capacity for shock and horror—it is humanity’s capacity” (p. 8). Images can be powerful tools for movement and paired with documentary narratives can offer further insights to help aid in closing the gap in soldier, veteran, and civilian communication.

One final component of documentaries is sentimentality. In a study conducted by McWilliam and Bickle (2017), the impact of sentimentality is explored in relation to a segment series *Stories of Service*. As McWilliam and Bickle analyze and compare each story, they argue that while the classic storyline of the soldier’s journey may be redundant, it serves an important purpose as veterans and soldiers “pass the torch” to the next generation. According to McWilliam and Bickle, “‘passing the torch’ may be read as less than a metaphor for the cognitive understanding of historical events and more as a process by which succeeding generations both empathize with the veteran’s experiences and incorporate the same values into their own lives and actions” (p. 85). Using veteran and soldier stories as a guide, civilians can glean insight into experiences they may otherwise not understand.

McWilliam and Bickle further explain, “veterans see the digital stories as a successful means of connecting and transferring values across generations—not only in terms of the youth volunteers who produce the story [*Stories of Service*] but also for the far broader audience promised by the unlimited potential of the Internet” (p. 85). As veterans pass on their stories of war, a connection between veterans and civilians is formed; especially when the narrative remains relatively the same. McWilliams and Bickle state, “narratives that are repetitive and sentimental may not only reassure veterans of the stability of their legacy but also be effective in

influencing public memory” (p. 85). By infiltrating public memory, a better understanding of veterans and soldiers can be established; closing the gap between soldier, veteran, and civilian communication.

Narratives and Mental Illness

The concept of storytelling and narratives play a key role in understanding mental illness and stigmas. According to Ma and Nan (2018), “narratives were more often than non-narratives in promoting favorable attitudes towards people with mental illnesses” (p. 196). Since mental illness stigmas can prevent people from “seeking treatment and robs important life opportunities from them” such as housing, employment, and normal human interactions, narratives serve as a bridge between those with mental illness and those without mental illnesses (p. 196). In a study conducted by Ma and Nan, the significance of narratives in relation to positive perceptions of mental illnesses was tested. Five hundred sixty-two college students were surveyed for the study through an online questionnaire asking students about their pre-existing attitudes towards those with mental illness. Each participant was “then randomly assigned to one of the three experimental conditions: exposure to a first-person narrative, exposure to a third person narrative, and exposure to a non-narrative” (p. 200). Once participants read the message, they were “asked a series of questions about their attitudes towards people with mental illnesses and the mental health services” (p. 200). Additionally, transportation (story immersion), perceived persuasive intent, counterarguing, and identification were taken into consideration. A Likert-scale was used to measure each category.

After collecting the results, Ma and Nan found gender had a significant effect on how mental illness and mental health services were viewed. Women “expressed more favorable attitudes” towards those with mental illness and mental health services than men (p. 203).

Overall, however, “the narrative message, compared to the non-narrative message, was associated with more imagery, a greater sense of being in a narrative world, more intense emotions, and stronger attentional focus” (p. 204). Narrative messaging also reduced counterarguing “which led to more favorable attitudes towards mental health services” (p. 205). Since media plays a crucial role in human understanding and perceptions of others, Ma and Nan argue there is a strong need for “media campaigns and messages that have the potential to reduce stigma and promote acceptance of mental illnesses” in order to “combat this persisting social problem that jeopardizes equity and incurs economic loss” (p. 196). By analyzing the use of documentaries to close the civilian and military gap, the hope is to form a narrative in which civilians have a better understanding of military illnesses and prevent the spread of stigmas and damaging stereotypes.

Reaching the Target Audience

As documentaries become a form of communication between soldiers, veterans, and civilians, understanding how to reach civilians in the most effective manner becomes apparent. According to a Pew Research study conducted by Rainie (2017), “overall, 59% of U.S. adults say cable connections are their primary means of watching TV, while 28% cite streaming services and 9% say they use digital services” (para. 3). Young adults tend to consume media differently. Rainie states, “additionally, 37% of the younger adults who prefer watching the news over reading it cite the web, not television, as their platform of choice” (para 6). This leads to greater consumption of media on social media platforms as “two-thirds of adults—including 78% of those under 50—get at least some news from social media” (para. 6). The change in how people consume media has been dubbed with the term “cord cutters”. According to Wormald (2015), “a shift in how people watch TV is underway, as the Pew Research Center data suggests

15% of American adults are now ‘cord cutters’—that is they once had cable or satellite TV connection, but no longer subscribe” (para. 1). By evaluating and understanding the shifts in how people consume media, communication practitioners can decide the most effective way to air documentaries to close the soldier, veteran, and civilian gap.

While the platform in which civilians receive media is crucial, the way the audience interacts with the documentaries is just as important. This can be accomplished through interactive documentaries. According to Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and Pereira-Fariña (2017), “interactive documentary is a genre of multimedia language, built with the integration of diverse textual and audiovisual elements, graphics, maps, and computer-generated environment” (p. 408). Using documentaries as an interactive experience allows one to expand upon what they have seen but only on their own accord as it “requires the user’s attention and their proactivity during the whole experience” (p. 403). Since documentaries are a one-way form of communication, it is crucial to direct people to interactive platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or YouTube to further elaborate and discuss the communication barriers between soldiers, veterans, and civilians. By creating an interactive platform “the user has the capacity to choose his or her way towards their own end”, “the message built during the journey gets closer to personalization of consumption”, and “the control that now enjoys the user has been transferred by the author, who designs and defines the user’s possibilities” (p. 407). Interactive documentaries allow the viewer to take a step further in their journey and expand upon what was learned during the film; a key component in bridging the gap between soldier, veteran, and civilian communication.

Fantasy-theme Theory, Cultivation Theory, and Symbolic Convergence Theory

Using documentaries, the hope is to play upon the positives of fantasy-theme theory, cultivation theory, and symbolic convergence theory. According to West and Turner (2010), “television’s major cultural function is to stabilize social patterns, to cultivate resistance to change” (p. 381). Since West and Turner state “most people get their information from mediated sources rather than through direct experience”, documentaries offer a unique opportunity for civilians to learn about military life from a personal soldier or veteran perspective (p. 379). Although six-in-ten (61%) of civilians in a Pew Research study stated they know an immediate family member who has served in the military, only 8% stated they understand problems faced by the military very well and 19% stated they understand it fairly well (War and Sacrifice, 2011, p. 64- 66). By using documentaries as a bridge between the lack of understanding surrounding military life versus civilian life, the hope is to establish resonance as “a viewer’s lived reality coincides with the reality pictured in the media” (West & Turner, 2010, p. 384). Heavy viewers of media tend to experience greater effects of mainstreaming in which they “perceive a similar culturally dominant reality to that pictured on the media [that] differs from actual reality” (p. 383). Since “people and groups are influenced by cultural and social processes”, the accuracy and visual perspective of the documentary is crucial as the hope is for the material to become mainstream in order to foster understanding of soldier and veteran military life and mental illnesses (p. 83). According to West and Turner, “television...blurs traditional distinctions of people’s views of their world, blends people’s realities into television cultural mainstream, and bend that mainstream to the institutional interests of television and its sponsors” (p. 386). By evaluating documentaries for accuracy and unbiased filming as well as story construction,

documentaries can be used as a tool to close the communication gap between soldiers, veterans, and civilians in a mass media manner.

Desensitizing of Violence and Trauma

One component filmmakers and documentaries must take into careful consideration is the desensitization of violence and trauma. According to Vossen, Piotrowski, and Valkenburg (2017), “desensitization can be understood as a decreased physiological, emotional, and cognitive response to real-world violence and is thought to be an adaptive process to help individuals deal with distress resulting from the confrontation of violence” (p. 177). Although scholars debate whether empathy or sympathy directly affects desensitization, it has been discovered the more an individual is exposure to trauma and violence the less they are affected by the images (Vossen, Piotrowski, & Valkenburg, 2017; Scharrer, 2008). According to Vossen, Piotrowski, and Valkenburg (2017), “empathy means ‘feeling with’ the other person and, thus, feeling sad” while “sympathy refers to ‘feeling for’ the other person, and thus, not feeling sadness but concern” (p. 179). As people are exposed to traumatic or violent narratives, the scenes may become “normalized”. In a study conducted by Scharrer (2008), surveying 476 adults through a non-random quota sample in Florida, Alabama, and Massachusetts, it was discovered that greater exposure to media violence led viewers to find the stories “less disturbing, less shocking, less likely to impact their emotions, and more easily forgotten than those with lower levels of exposure” (p. 22). It was also discovered that gender did not impact whether an individual found violence disturbing. Using the impact of desensitization as a parameter for soldier and veteran documentaries, filmmakers and those partaking in the soldier and veteran narrative want to make sure violence is not overused to explain the situation or the shock value will be lost.

Research Design and Method

To analyze the impact documentaries have on closing the communication gap between soldiers, veterans, and civilians, the qualitative method of case study research will be used. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), “case study research is defined as a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system... through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” (p. 96- 97). For this specific case study, content analysis was utilized in conjunction with manifest analysis and latent analysis. According to Bengtsson (2016), “in a manifest analysis, the researcher describes what the informants actually say, stays very close to the text, uses the words themselves, and describes the visible and obvious in the text” while a latent analysis is more “interpretative” and “seeks to find the underlying meaning” (p. 10). This study utilized both a manifest and latent analysis to focus upon audiovisual and textual material in the documentaries for research. By analyzing five documentaries capturing a variety of perspectives from a military lens, common themes and underlying issues were measured for their impact on bridging the gap between soldier, veteran, and civilian communication.

Data

The five documentaries analyzed are *Restrepo*, *Korengal*, *Lioness*, *Brothers At War*, and *Trauma*. These documentaries were chosen through searches on the internet for “top war documentaries” and through the suggested content on Amazon. Since people searching specifically for war documentaries may first search for suggestions on the internet and then continue watching content through suggested content on media platforms, this form of choosing documentaries allows the researcher to see interconnections on how available the content is to the public. The five documentaries were chosen through this form of selection to gain a civilian

standpoint on how they may select documentaries or learn about a realistic military perspective. This form of selection was not based on intended biases of choosing the most popular documentaries, but on which documentaries best expressed military life and would come up in civilian searches without extensive research. Unfortunately, many of these first-hand war documentaries were not readily available on Netflix, Hulu, or YouTube and instead needed to be rented or purchased on Amazon. This aspect could raise concern on the accessibility of these documentaries for civilians who are not actively seeking war documentary content and may not view these films unless it was included in their current subscriptions.

The first two documentaries, *Restrepo* and its sequel *Korengal*, follow the journey of a U.S. soldier platoon in Afghanistan from a first-person perspective. Stationed in one of the most dangerous areas known as Korengal Valley, the documentaries aim to make viewers feel they have experienced a deployment and elaborates upon the soldiers' personal experiences while fighting the Taliban. *Lioness* explores the evolution of five women who were some of the first women to fight in direct combat during the Iraq War. Told from a first-hand prospective, the documentary analyzes the struggles and triumphs women face in war including emotional and psychological effects of combat. *Brothers At War* follows the story of three brothers; two whom are currently serving in the military and one who wants to learn why his brothers take on such dangerous jobs. The documentary offers both personal insight into the lives of soldiers serving in the war, a close-knit family, and a civilian's perspective on encountering war for the first time. Finally, *Trauma* tracks the before and after thoughts of a trauma medical team who have seen the worst of war. As each discusses their journey, their personal insights offer a glimpse on how war effects both soldiers and their families in everyday life. These documentaries were chosen for

their objectivity, use of personal soldier interviews, and raw footage instead of reenactments; giving the documentaries an authentic feel.

The Ground Truth, *Travis: A Soldier's Story*, *The Hornet's Nest*, and *Legion of Brothers* were excluded from the study for a variety of reasons. Even though *The Ground Truth* was focused on the behind scenes of military life, it appeared to be extremely agenda driven with anti-military messaging. Although it offered personal insight into the lack of help and support for military soldiers and veterans returning home from war and a website to learn more information, the harsh tone of the documentary regarding military training and how soldiers are to chant "kill" and racial slurs about the Taliban, Iraq, and Afghanistan people during drills may turn viewers off to having open discussion with soldiers and veterans. A better explanation on military training protocol would be needed for the public to fully understand these underlying concerns; something first time viewers of a war documentary may not have in advance of watching this documentary and instead be seeking more information.

Travis: A Soldier's Story closely follows the life of a soldier wounded in combat who lost both his legs and parts of his arms. While the documentary offers insight into the physical scars of war, the reenactments intermingled with the interviews felt a bit forced and inauthentic. It also did not match the studies requirements for raw footage. Although *The Hornet's Nest* included live war footage, the documentary focused more on recording the missions of soldiers without collect their thoughts on the process and told the journey of a war cameraman and his son documenting the war. The last scene, however, in the documentary had an emotional impact as the general of the platoon cried at the monuments of his deceased soldiers. If the movie had included more personal soldier thoughts on the war, it would have been included in the study. Finally, *Legion of Brothers* follows the story of an elite platoon sent to combat the Taliban after

9/11. Even though the documentary discusses the aftereffects of war, the documentaries *Restrepo*, *Korengal*, and *Trauma* offered more detailed insights into the lives of soldiers and veterans as well as more raw footage to show civilians the first-hand the trauma of war.

Rhetorical Criticism

To ground these observations in research, rhetorical criticism will be utilized to code and decipher the data. According to Wander and Jenkins (1972), “criticism means coming to terms with an object in the light of one’s values. The play of values takes place of three points in the critical act: selection, response, and communication” (p. 441). As one analyzes a piece through a critical lens, it important to recognize personal bias to remain objective when deciphering data. Wander and Jenkins state, “this tacitly admits, however, that the question of objectivity turns us back into our own experience, for it is we who experience enthusiasm, and even when focusing on verbal conventions of objectivity, it is we, not some automatic measuring device, who interpret and apply such conventions” (p. 443). As personal experience influences one’s interpretations, the researcher must be able to separate facts tactfully and take into consideration outside influences on results. To backup claims, the researcher must be able to support findings with substantial evidence which is accessible outside the research project (Wander and Jenkins, 1972). Wander and Jenkins claim, “the purpose of writing criticism is to share a world of meaning with other human beings” (p. 450). By being aware of influences but also the need for human connectivity to form meaningful connections, rhetorical criticism provides a way to analyze the personal insights of soldiers and veterans and categorize common themes into concise meaning to see where the gap between soldier, veteran, and civilian communication needs improvement. Although reality can be seen as subjective rather than objective, it is important to note first-hand accounts of footage from documentaries without voiceovers can

merely show what is happening rather than trying to tell someone how they should feel. Even if specific footage is chosen for the documentary over other footage, the absence of voiceovers allows the documentary to report the “facts in flesh and blood” and document history for future reference (Bazin, 2001, p. 62).

Fantasy-theme Analysis and Cultivation Theory

When analyzing how documentaries glean personal insight into soldier and veteran lives and core commonalities which can be established through documentaries, it is crucial to take into consideration fantasy-theme analysis. According to Bormann (1972), “group fantasizing correlates with individual fantasizing and extrapolates to speaker-audience fantasizing and to the dream of merchants of the mass media” (p. 396). Bormann states, “when group members respond emotionally to the dramatic situation they publicly proclaim some commitment to attitude” (p. 397). As groups begin to relate on core commonalities and shared experiences, their shared experiences allow them to feel connected to others who may have experienced similar situations (Bormann, 1972). Using fantasy-theme analysis to analyze war documentaries can help establish common themes and insights gleaned from personal soldier interviews and raw footage.

As these shared soldier and veteran experiences come together to create a narrative, civilians in turn will also form personal connections to the stories if told in a compelling manner. According to Bormann (1972), “just as fantasy themes chain out in the group to create a unique group culture so do the fantasy dramas of a successful persuasive campaign chain out in public audiences to form a rhetorical vision” (p. 398). Bormann explains “a rhetorical vision is constructed from fantasy themes that chain out in face-to-face interacting groups, in speaker audience transactions, in viewers of television broadcasts, in listeners to radio programs, and in

all the diverse setting for public and intimate communication in a given society” (p. 398). This closely aligns with cultivation theory and the aspect of people believing what is shown through the media to be reality. Rhetorical visions contain people’s “drives to action” and allows for “prediction of scheduled motives” (p. 407). According to Bormann, “more importantly, once we participate in the rhetorical vision of a community or movement, even if we keep an aesthetic distance, we have come vicariously to experience a way of life that would otherwise be less accessible to use, we have enlarged our awareness, we have become more fully human” (p. 407). This concept of including civilians in a soldier and veteran’s rhetorical vision will be crucial in closing the gap between military personnel and civilians and analyzing the impact documentaries can make in sharing these rhetorical visions with the public.

Symbolic Convergence Theory

To further understand the shared rhetorical visions in fantasy-theme theory and cultivation theory, one must take into consideration symbolic convergence theory. According to Bormann (1985), “the symbolic convergence theory of communication is a general theory within the broad framework that accounts for human communication in terms of *homo nurruns*” (p. 128). Bormann states, “the theory explains the appearance of a group consciousness, with its implied shared emotions, motives, and meaning, not in terms of individual daydreams and scripts but rather in terms of socially shared narrations or fantasies” (p. 128). The concept of symbolic convergence theory allows scholars to categorize shared experience into concrete terms using symbolic cues. These cues “may be a code word, phrase, slogan, or nonverbal sign or gesture; it may refer to a geographical or imaginary place or the name of a person; it may arouse tears or evoke anger, hatred, love, and affection as well as laughter and humor” (p. 132). As rhetorical vision brings multiple shared experiences together into a unified message, the need to code these

experiences becomes apparent. Symbolic convergence theory “creates a symbolic climate and culture that allows people to achieve empathic communication” and understand other people’s point of views (p. 134). This can be achieved from “the human tendency to try and understand events in terms of people with certain personality traits and motivations, making decisions, taking actions, and causing things to happen” (p. 134). These theories greatly rely on human beings’ tendency to be drawn to narratives and “social storytelling”. Symbolic convergence theory is another way to make “systematic explanations of a variety of human communication within the general approach of the narrative paradigm” (p. 136). By using symbolic convergence theory in the coding process of war documentaries, common themes can be established and a better understanding of how documentaries can influence civilian perceptions on soldier and veteran lives can be measured.

Coding Process

Each of the chosen five documentaries were analyzed for three core aspects: personal insight into soldier and veteran lives, common established themes in soldier narratives, and civilian takeaways from the documentaries. Using direct quotes from the soldiers, veterans, and family members of military personnel in the documentaries, key words and phrases such a post-traumatic stress disorder, moral injury, mental illness, and the military and civilian gap were looked for within the film. Indirect references to these terms were also noted. This included nightmares, flashbacks, trouble sleeping, acknowledging moral uncertainty, and stating civilians or people “don’t understand”. A tally for the total number of times the documentary mentions each phrase was taken using a chart. The chart included a section of common themes outlined within each documentary as well as the transcript of specific quotes referencing these themes. Both linguistics, emotional responses, and body language are equally important to determine the

effects of war and personal perspective of soldiers and veterans since post-war traumas or narratives can be a sensitive topic. Emotions and body language were under the category reactions. If soldiers and veterans can communicate core themes and experiences in war documentaries, then the public can glean personal insight into the lives of soldier and veterans without the need for military personnel to constantly repeat themselves. These documentaries could also give a voice to those soldiers and veteran who may not be ready to talk about their war experiences.

Since visuals are a crucial component in understanding the experience of war through raw footage and seeing the emotional impacts it has on soldiers, it must be taken into consideration when coding language. Graphic scenes were documented through descriptions in a chart to show how the documentaries may try to place the civilian watching the documentary into the soldier's footsteps. Camera angles were particularly important as to whether the films are shot from a perspective of one witnessing the war first-hand or as a bystander. These descriptions were placed under the setting category of the chart titled setting. It was also important to see if the documentaries include a "call to action" for civilians after watching the documentary. It was noted if the documentaries included a forum either via social media, blogs, email, or another form of contact in which civilians can ask soldiers and veterans questions, continue the conversation about military life, or seek additional resources to learn more about soldier and veteran mental health. If there is no take home message at the end of the documentary, the messaging may become lost as opportunity to continue closing the gap between soldier, veteran, and civilian communication has been missed. Ensuring an outlet for continuing this discussion will not only aid civilian's understanding military life but allow soldiers, veterans, and civilian to communicate in real time and without specific content

boundaries. While there may be some downfalls of this process such as insensitivity to military personnel through internet trolls, the hope is the documentaries will curb insensitive questions and allow others to defend and protect those who may suffer from military mental illness with guided and accurate information from the documentaries. This was placed under the resource category of the chart.

As the category of common themes, keywords/direct quotes, reactions, setting, and resources are broken down for each documentary and placed in one cohesive coding book, the following research questions were kept at the forefront of the study:

RQ1: What common themes are established through the military lens of soldier and veteran perspectives?

RQ2: How do military documentaries offer personal insight into soldier and veteran lives?

RQ3: Based on the common themes established, what proactive steps can civilians take to better soldier, veteran, and civilian communication?

The next section outlines the findings from the five documentaries analyzed (*Restrepo*, *Korengal*, *Lioness*, *Brothers At War*, and *Trauma*) in relation to the above research questions.

Results

Introduction

After watching each documentary in correspondence with the three research questions outlined above, five themes across the documentaries were discovered:

1. Personal insight and prospective into daily military life, the calling of being a soldier, and the sacrifices made as a result

2. The relationship between American soldiers and the Afghanistan and Iraqi people explained both from a comrade, civilian to soldier, and enemy prospective
3. The difficulty of adjusting back to civilian life and the gap in understanding between soldiers, veterans, and civilians
4. The deep and lasting bonds soldiers develop with their comrades who are like family
5. The implications of lasting moral, physical, and mental traumas of war (often shrouded in vague terms or alluded to indirectly) as well as how soldier cope with these emotions

In the following sections, each theme will be broken down encompassing the five documentaries analyzed; utilizing both quotes and scenes from the film. By using both visual and audio representation, individuals watching the documentaries are indirectly able to gain insight on what it means to be an American soldier through both an observer and soldier prospective. These concepts will be explored in more detail in the discussion portion of the study in comparison to fantasy-theme theory, cultivation theory, and symbolic convergence theory.

Theme 1: Military Life and Sacrifice

I. Daily Soldier Life and Responsibilities

The documentaries *Restrepo*, *Korengal*, *Lioness*, *Brothers At War*, and *Trauma* each provide insight into the daily and often difficult responsibilities of the Army, Marines, and medivac soldiers. Portrayed through visual scenes of soldiers partaking in combat, searching homes for weapons of destruction, loading soldiers onto stretchers, and providing medical assistance, the viewer can physically see the responsibilities soldiers carry out in the military and feel as though they are alongside the soldiers on deployment. Camera perspective is extremely crucial in these scenes as some position the viewer as an observer, while others allow the viewer

to feel as if they are a soldier running beside their fellow comrades, firing a weapon, or assisting a wounded victim. For example, in one scene of *Restrepo*, viewers are placed in the prospective of a soldier during a crossfire. As the sounds of bullets are heard whizzing by, the camera angle shakes back and forth as if the viewer is running. Small glimpses of the compound can be seen with quick views of the mountains where the enemy is hiding. As the barrack quickly comes into view, the soldier takes cover. A gun is loaded, and the soldier begins shooting next to his comrades as they yell commands over the gunfire. Filmed from a first-person prospective, the viewer can feel as if they are firing a weapon at the enemy next to their fellow soldiers and are trying to avoid being shot. This perspective can provide insight into what it means to be in a soldier's position. Voiceovers provide additional insight on the tasks and add an authentic voice to the process as he/she listens to the soldier explain their responsibilities. As the viewer starts to understand these responsibilities and what it is like to be deployed, interviews with the soldiers can provide a clear picture as to why many of these men and women fight for their country.

In each documentary the soldiers describe their daily lives and responsibilities, giving viewers a first-person perspective on what it means to be a soldier. When describing his deployment conditions in the Korengal, Captain Dan Kearney stated,

“I show up there and you're burning your own feces. You know, you're living in a tent. I literally lived in a bunker, you know, about that high, I couldn't even stand up in. See bullet holes all rattled into the Hescos and when you look up, it's like, I don't even know why I have Hescos here because they're not going to stop the bullets that are coming down from the mountains. So I felt like I was like fish in a barrel” (Hetherington & Junger, 2010).

As the soldiers face constant fire and try to improve the lives of the Afghanistan people, viewers can see how these soldiers live and feel about the harsh conditions of their environment. One soldier in Kearny's platoon stated, “I remember thinking, you know, holy shit, did everybody from the entire country come to this valley? Is nobody else fighting anymore? Is every bad guy

in my face?” (Hetherington & Junger, 2010). Soldiers in *Brothers At War* expressed similar sentiments about the constant exchange of fire. As he stands in front of a wrecked barrack, Isaac Rademacher states, “And I remember soldiers laying here, bleeding. I remember soldiers sitting crouched down in the bunker, in almost a fetal position. It was a real wake-up call for us, because it happened days after we arrive here to start doing our missions” (Rademacher, 2009). These harsh conditions also create a higher awareness in the soldiers of their surroundings. According to Specialist Kyle Steiner, “You're suspicious of everything. You see a tiny hole in the ground and you step on the hole, you look around the hole, you pick up rocks, you wonder why there's a rockslide at the end of the Ridge... That eerie feeling... knowing that they're looking at you. Your heart's beating” (Junger, 2014). These sentiments are shown through a variety of war footage filmed from both a first-person observer and soldier prospective. Viewers may feel they are shooting heavy artillery, ducking behind bunkers, and searching the locals for weapons. By utilizing various camera angles, this allows viewers to feel as if they are serving alongside the soldiers and experiencing a first-person point of view.

Lioness also explored the daily exchanging of firefights but from a female perspective. During the time *Lioness* was filmed, female soldiers often had to go against the legal laws of Congress to fulfill key military missions. These women became known as the Lioness team and were trained to alleviate local tensions. The female soldiers were trained to search Iraqi women and children for weapons because male soldiers are forbidden from touching them due to religious reasons. As female soldiers are seen smiling with the women and child and handing out supplies, Specialist Nava states in a voiceover, “They need females to go out with them on the missions to help calm the women and children. We gave the kids candy, toys, school supplies. So, in the beginning, the Army didn't look so bad to them” (McLagan & Sommers, 2008). As

women began to be included in important missions, differentiating between male and female soldiers minimized despite concerns of female casualties. According to Major Guttormsen, “When we go outside of the wire, the enemy doesn’t care what gender you are. And everybody runs the same risk of an IED ambush or small arms ambush” (McLagan & Sommers, 2008). Scenes of tanks driving through the city, engaging in crossfire, women shooting weapons and assisting in searches could be observed throughout the documentary; further enforcing the similarities between female and male soldiers. Guttormsen stated, “We were driving down the road, going, you know, closing your eyes when you drive by something on the side of the road because you don’t know what’s going to happen” (McLagan & Sommers, 2008). By showing women in combative roles and positions like male soldiers, viewers can have a better understanding of women’s active roles in the military during a time where these roles were not yet official in Congress.

Finally, the documentary, *Trauma*, provided insight into the behind the scenes roles of medivacs. While medivacs also engage in crossfire when necessary, their main mission is to save the wounded. These soldiers specifically discussed being trained to be desensitized to immediate trauma. As viewers see Mike attending to wounded in a medivac helicopter, he states in a voiceover, “We take a proactive approach at this site. We try to desensitize the guys that haven’t seen much, relatively new people to this line of work. So when we’re in the back we try and expose them, make them see it, to kinda desensitize them a little bit so when it gets really bad they won’t freeze up” (Sanna, 2017). This desensitization is crucial to the medivac mission to save lives. If a soldier freezes, it would put both the patient and medivac team in danger. Although medivacs are trained to focus on the task at hand, it doesn’t remove all sentiment. During his voiceover, viewers can see Bart attending to a badly wounded victim. As Bart tries to

resuscitate the individual and provide medical assistance, the patient doesn't respond. Blood is covering parts of the victim's body and his lifeless body leaves a haunting image. According to Bart, "For some patients, no matter what you do, they are going to die, just because of the type of injury. Back of your head, you know he's not gonna make it, but there's still, in the front of your head, I gotta do it, I gotta try, I gotta work him, give it everything I got. Knowing that some patients are not going to make it no matter what, it helps a little" (Sanna, 2017). Often, when the medivac soldiers are discussing their daily responsibilities or feelings about the mission, scenes of soldiers running to the medivac helicopter, gearing up for a mission or caring for the injured by assisting in medical care are shown. These individualized interviews and voiceovers of military action scenes allow the viewer to be both an observer and feel they are experiencing the scene firsthand. While some of these scenes are extremely graphic in nature, it allows the viewer to gain more insight into the warzone and to see on a small scale some of the traumas these individuals endure; including the personal cost for the soldiers involved.

II. Reasons to Serve

The interviews conducted throughout the documentaries also enable the viewer to understand the thoughts of the soldiers regarding their service. According to Specialist Sterling Jones, "I'm not doing this for recognition from my country. I'm not doing this so that somebody goes, wow those guys are really patriotic. Those guys are really brave. Truthfully, I could give a shit what anybody thinks, except for those guys to my left and my right cause' that's what it's about" (Junger, 2014). When asked specifically about their perceptions of bravery, Joshua McDonough stated, "We didn't talk about that word very much cause' we didn't feel what we were doing was bravery. We were there, we signed up to do this, and all of our friends and buddies and soldiers and, you know, peers and superiors were next to us doing it, so you couldn't

really pick out bravery” (Junger, 2014). In a personal interview, Captain Isaac Rademacher stated, “In my heart of hearts, I didn’t want to leave the Army. I belong there. So...That’s what I do. We don’t do it for the money, or just to have a career, it’s because I feel like I’m called to do so. It’s my call to duty, if you will. It’s just who I am.” (Rademacher, 2009). Sergeant Joe Rademacher expressed a similar call to service. He stated, “You gotta have a sheepdog in order to protect the sheep from the wolves. Sheep are, for the most part, innocent, you know. Sheepdog, he’s organized chaos. You have to have organized chaos in order to have a free orderly life” (Rademacher, 2009). Although each soldier has a different reason for serving, these interviews allow viewers to try and wrap their minds around a soldier’s desire to be a part of a bigger cause. By gaining insight into the soldier’s views on their service, viewers may better understand why these men would subject themselves to such harsh conditions.

This call to service also transpired in the medivac soldiers. According to one medivac, “A lot of people call medevac the Army’s most sacred mission. Because we’re the people that go to the middle of the combat zone, and pick up America’s sons and daughters, treat them, and bring them to the place that is going to get them home” (Sanna, 2018). Robert, a medivac soldier, additionally stated, “It’s life and death, we don’t fly, people die. It’s highly addictive. It’s hard to get out of your blood once you’ve had some good adrenaline dumps like we’ve had, it’s very addictive” (Sanna, 2017) These shared feelings about the medivac mission directly correspond to views on military life and the purpose of each soldier within the unit. Although one may question why soldiers would allude to an adrenaline rush while serving, it appears many soldiers use this as a coping mechanism for war. As everything passes by fast pace, many times soldiers do not have time to process the information in order to stay alive which therefore creates an adrenaline high. Despite this high, several of the soldiers expressed a strong commitment to their careers.

According to Mike, a medic soldier, “It’s addictive, for me there’s no other thing. I’d rather stay at my current job than to get promoted and have to go do somethin’ else. I hate it and I like it at the same time. I don’t know, I just, I don’t know why I stay to tell you the truth, stupid I guess” (Sanna, 2017). Julian, a medivac piolet, stated, “I really still enjoy doin’ my job, I enjoy bein’ in the military, I enjoy getting’ up and puttin’ on my uniform every day. I do have a sense of purpose, a sense of self-worth” (Sanna, 2017). Julian also expressed the urgency of the mission by stating, “It’s all pure adrenaline. We drop whatever what we’re doin’. We’re getting’ out to the aircraft as fast as possible, gearin’ up, and gettin’ the blades turnin’. It all happens real quick” (Sanna, 2017). An average of 7 minutes is utilized to prepare for medivac missions according to the medivac team in *Trauma*. As soldiers are trained to meet strict time requirements, as they may be called to action at any moment, this adrenaline allows soldiers to quickly respond and react to emergencies; fulfilling their duty to service.

III. Family and Personal Sacrifice

Throughout the documentaries, soldiers acknowledged the personal sacrifice of joining the military including having a spouse who is also serving. While packing up her belongings at home to begin the process of moving, Guttormsen discusses her and her husband’s service in the military. Guttormsen states, “We’d both like to make it to 20 years but it’s really hard these days and we’re not willing to sacrifice the marriage or anything you know for the Army. So we’re hoping the Army is going to work with us and keep us together” (McLagan & Sommers, 2008). Nava also voices the sacrifice made by military couples; some which brings them closer together and some which makes life at home difficult. As Nava discusses these personal sacrifices, the viewers see closeups of Nava and her husband spending time together while feeding and changing their young daughter. According to Nava, “Knowing that you could die any minute

brought us a lot more closer. And it's brought our families a lot closer" (McLagan & Sommers, 2008). This sacrifice comes at a cost, however, as Nava and her husband miss out on crucial moments with their daughter. Viewers catch a glimpse in the documentary of Nava bringing her daughter to base to skype her husband overseas. As Nava and her husband talk with their daughter on Nava's lap, it comes time for them to say goodbye. When Nava asks her husband not to leave, he says gently not to make him cry. Nava states in a voiceover, "We keep in touch, but he's missing a lot of my daughter's life. He missed her first birthday, her first footsteps, her first Christmas" (McLagan & Sommers, 2008). Isaac Rademacher expressed similar sentiments about his own daughter as the viewers see a scene of Isaac embracing his wife and greeting his daughter again after a long deployment. Throughout his time home, it can be seen Isaac is trying to reconnect with his daughter by playing fun games, celebrating her birthday, and helping her to walk. According to Isaac,

"I'm going to come home, and the one thing I'm going to want to do is just pick her up and hug her. And the reality of it is that she may not let me, because she won't remember who I am. I'm going to have to go home and reacquaint myself with my own daughter and prove to her that I love her" (Rademacher, 2009).

Isaac additionally faced the loss of his younger brother during his deployment due to a drug overdose. According to Isaac, "I didn't expect any of my family that I left back here to get hurt. Then, one dies, thereby hurting so many others. Now, I got chaos in the Middle East and I got chaos at home. It's pretty much bullshit. It's a two-front war. It's what defeated Napoleon. It's not fair" (Rademacher, 2009). The medivac mission also comes at a personal price and sacrifice. According to Mike, "The mission that we chose, you know, you put your life on the line for somebody else, you don't think about yourself. I think the hardest part for me was admitting that I needed some help" (Sanna, 2017). Mike also references how military life as a medivac has impacted his personal relationship with his daughter and wife. According to Mike, "The regrets I

have are the effects that it's had on my relationships. The mission became more important than me, became more important than my family. Logically yeah, it is worth it. 'Cause, you know, you have 1,200 people who are goin' back to their families, and that's just a very few, that's just the people I treated. But, I'm startin' to realize that the price is too high" (Sanna, 2017). As viewers listen to the soldiers reflecting on their personal sacrifices for their country, they can be reminded of the effects service has on a soldier's personal life as they choose to protect their country and miss out on important moments in life.

Another aspect discussed regarding military life is the personal sacrifice soldiers make by enlisting in the military. Isaac reflects, "I may be walking out that door for the last time and abandoning the people I love the most. And for what? A cause. I mean, I already told you I believe in what I'm doing. But damn, you're asking a lot if I don't come back." (Rademacher, 2009). Ben Fischer, a sergeant infantry regiment, also expresses sentiments about sacrifices made during war. According to Fischer,

"I love the job, but there's some personal stuff I'd like to have too. Not sure if I can get that right now because you're going to be deployed. You're going to be gone a year, home a year, gone a year, home a year. So it's confusing. You're just an adrenaline junkie now, you like the adrenaline rush, but you like your family too" (Rademacher, 2009).

These personal perspectives show that while soldiers feel they are called to serve, there are still sacrifices and choices they must make to follow their career in the military. Although soldiers voiced the deep sacrifices of service, many viewed their actions worthwhile even if it cost them personally. While shadowing soldiers on a lookout mission in the field, Jake Rademacher asked them about the cost of their personal sacrifice. Covered in dust and sitting under light makeshift shelters in the scorching heat, Specialist Christopher MacKay and Staff Sergeant Robert Lackey Jr. reflect on what their service means to them in separate interviews. When asked if the mission

is worth the cost of his life, MacKay, who expressed his commitment to service to fight for his nieces' future, states while holding back tears, "Yeah, it'd be worth it. That's why I'm here. I'd give my life for America any day. I wouldn't think twice" (Rademacher, 2009). Lackey Jr. also alluded to fighting for freedom. Grinning ear to ear Lackey states,

"It's funny when you come home, come back from a year-long deployment, and you go to the mall and you see some fat guy stuffing his face with hot dogs, I'm thankful for that, because that guy can kill himself on nitrate-cicles anytime he wants to. We fight for that, that's what he wants and I'm happy for him" (Rademacher, 2009).

Through these humanistic qualities, viewers can start to see a side of soldiers which may not normally be portrayed in the media. This allows further insight into the lives of soldiers overseas and breaks down stereotype barriers of soldiers being stoic and unaffected by their service.

Theme 2: Relations with the Locals

Relations with the locals was another widely expressed theme. While there were a variety of positive, negative, and neutral perspectives on the locals, almost every soldier voiced a concern to help better the lives of the local people. Throughout the documentaries, soldiers can be seen talking and smiling with the locals as they start to form positive relationships. When referencing interactions with the locals in a non-warzone area, Corke stated, "In my mind at least, it shows that there is a chance for Iraq. Up here, everything's going well. You have Christians, Muslims, walking down the street together, no problems" (Rademacher, 2009). Staff Sergeant Edward Allier opinion of the locals drastically changed during his second time in Iraq. He states, "I'm happy that I got a chance to do this job, because when I left the first time, I had a negative opinion about the people here. When I started seeing Iraqi soldiers that I trained and ate and slept with bleeding, getting shot to my left and right, doing the same kind of job that my Marines would be doing, that made me a little more open-minded to start listening to them"

(Rademacher, 2009). After an intensive and gory fight between the insurgents, American troops, and the Iraqi allies, Allier was even seen giving a speech about the local's bravery and how they fought like real soldiers; giving each one of them a genuine hug or pat on the back. Medivac soldiers in *Trauma* also expressed compassion for the locals. According to Bart,

“As long as there's US soldiers here, we're going to be here to take care of them. Obviously, we feel more for the American soldiers because we're Americans, but, we also need to take care of the Afghan soldiers...I have nothing to do with any of the local nationals but, a patient's a patient. Once I get my hands on them in the back of the aircraft, I don't care who they are, they're gonna get treated, I'm gonna do my best for 'em” (Sanna, 2017).

Others expression more caution when treating the locals despite carrying out treatments the same for the value of human life. According to Mitch,

“You know I wanna think of some of these guys are just like me and you. Where, they care about their country and they care about you know, protections of their family and all that. It's still scary. And there's only so far that our medics and crew chiefs can pat these guys down or just like I said, I hope some of these guys are good” (Sanna, 2017).

These insights provide a more personal feel of how soldiers viewed the locals positively and its personal effect on their mission.

Not all the soldiers, however, had positive interactions with the locals, but some still respected the enemy. According to Steiner, “Those Chechnyan rebel guys, those hired guys, they're ruthless, awesome. Awesome fighters, trained. They came equipped, like, they went through a basic training, and knew how to fight. You have to respect the enemy. If you don't, you're sucking” (Junger, 2014). Kearny additionally expressed mixed views on his respect for the Korengal people. He states,

“Do I respect them? I don't respect the Korengalis. Like, when you gather them all up, no. They're a bunch of liars, and they didn't want us, they didn't want our help. Are there certain individuals in the Korengal that I do respect? Yes, I believe that they want it better for their people and they want it better for their families. But they were caught between a rock and a hard place” (Junger, 2014).

Other soldiers expressed discontentment when trying to work with the locals but failing in their communication efforts. According to Caldwell, “The thing that's sad to me is that as much as Captain Kearney go down there and conduct different Shuras and tell them about the positives about what we can do to help them, it seemed like it didn't go anywhere. You know? It seemed like everything that he- We took one step forward and it seemed like they took two steps backwards” (Hetherington & Junger, 2010). By listening to a variety of views on the locals, viewers may begin to understand the relationships between the American soldiers and the local people.

Finally, some soldiers expressed negative opinions about the locals; mainly due to the intensive firing and the lack of mutual respect and trust as the locals acted friendly and then would turn on the soldiers. Cortez expressed how many times the soldiers felt they were being lied to by the elders. He states, “We, um, had thoughts about the elders just lying straight to us and there was times where we just wanted to, you know, beat the shit out of them and make them tell us the truth” (Junger, 2014). According to Steiner,

“Hearts and minds goes out the window when you see the guy shooting at you, and then he puts his wife and kids in front of him, knowing full well that we won’t shoot back. Or the guy that shakes our hand, takes the ten bags of rice we give him for his family and the school supplies and the coats and immediately walks up the Mountain and shoots an RPG at us, walks back down then smiles the next morning when he's walking his goats. Fuck his heart and fuck his mind” (Junger, 2014).

In fact, some soldiers would cheer when the enemy was killed while others expressed valuing American lives over those in Afghanistan. Steiner explains by stating,

“The cheering comes, I think, from knowing that that's a person you'll never have to fight again. That's a person that's not gonna attempt to kill you ever again. And as sick as people may think it is at home or people that don't understand it... (sighs loudly) Fighting another human being is... Is not as hard as you'd think when they're trying to kill you” (Junger, 2014).

Breslow in *Lioness* expressed similar sentiments by stating, “I can’t help but value our lives over theirs. I don’t understand how these people can be so wrong. I suppose they see us the same way but I have to believe we are right. Our hearts are in the right place. We kill for peace we cover each other. Even sitting here writing this I’m still amazed that I am part of this” (McLagan & Sommers, 2008). In scenes from *Restrepo* and *Korengal* soldiers can be seen searching local houses for weapons. In one instance, the soldiers investigate a local’s house only to find mystery items such as articles of clothing linked to the enemy. The man is arrested on the spot and escorted to camp while many of the soldiers expressed how they are glad they followed their instincts. Some of these interactions had lasting implications even in the civilian world. According to Mitch in *Trauma*, “You know, every time I see somebody that I know for a fact that they’re Muslim, I don’t wanna be anywhere near ‘em. It’s bad, you know, I don’t wanna be that way, but it’s hard to take away. Just, hate’s a strong word, but I hate them” (Sanna, 2017). While these views are more negative than those previously expressed, the diversity provides a well round prospective into the complicated relations between the locals and American soldiers.

Theme 3: Adjustment to Civilian Life and the Communication Gap

I. Avoidance in Communication about Deployment

As soldiers begin returning home after their deployments, the adjustment to civilian life can prove to be extremely difficult. In each documentary, the soldiers reference how they avoid telling their families about their deployment. Specialist Pemble states,

“But to my family, I never really told them much until about halfway into the deployment. I didn't tell them when Vimoto died. I didn't tell them when Sergeant Padilla lost his arm. I didn't tell them when Pisek got shot. I didn't tell them when Restrepo got killed. And then when Restrepo got killed was a few days before my mom's birthday also. So I had to suck it up when I called my mom on her birthday and act like everything was okay...” (Hetherington & Junger, 2010).

Specialist Morgan from the documentary *Lioness* and Specialist Cortez from the documentary *Korengal* also expressed withholding information about their deployment so their families didn't worry about them. Sitting around the family table with her grandparents, who are her adopted parents, Morgan states,

“My parents worry, and they worry, and they worry, and they worry. And I was afraid that my mom was going to get intensely sick, or have a heart attack, over worrying about me. So no matter where I was over there, if I had to sneak off somewhere or whatever, I would try to find a phone to call my mom and let her know I was okay.” (McLagan & Sommers, 2008)

Cortez reflects the same sentiments but also mentions how he avoids talking to family members who have served in the past. He states, “My stepfather's actually been in the army before. He somewhat understands what I've been going through, but I didn't want him worrying either, seeing that I couldn't sleep and... Just more of a chore for them back at home” (Junger, 2010).

Finally, Mike from the documentary *Trauma* expresses how he wouldn't tell his wife or daughter the full story of his deployment because it was easier not to have to repeat some of the things he saw. Mike states,

“I use to tell my wife that I didn't really go out of the base at all. So she didn't really understand what was goin' on. And then she found out. But I'll never give specifics. I don't wanna have to explain to my wife, or my daughter, some of the things I see. It's easier just to leave it at, you know, daddy's just helpin' people, that's what medics do” (Sanna, 2017).

While many soldiers feel they are protecting their families from their experiences and worry, this lack of communication can deepen the civilian and military communication gap as civilians or family members do not understand what their loved one has endured and in turn may not understand why they have changed.

II. Post Deployment Life

Many soldiers also expressed the change in their perspective and daily lives post deployment. According to Isaac Rademacher, “You can’t really explain what it’s like when you reintegrate into society. You feel like you don’t belong. Moreover, though you feel just like nobody understands you” (Rademacher, 2009). Others expressed frustration about trivial civilian problems. Joe Rademacher states,

“When I came back from Iraq, I couldn’t go through Walmart without getting extremely irritated. I was consistently surrounded by people who were complaining about cell phone bills and they didn’t have the right size, the food wasn’t fresh enough, whatever. Man, none of that shit matters. To stare death in the face, or to watch your best friend die, or to just be scared of dying. When that’s over, you’re alive like you’ve never been before” (Rademacher, 2009).

This vast difference in understanding and perspectives from regular life to the warzone furthers civilian and military communication; as soldiers begin integrating back into a society they may feel they can no longer connect on a personal level.

Soldiers also voiced how deployment has taken a toll on their personal relations with family and friends; often leading to fighting or misunderstandings. Robert Speth states,

“I mean there’s days where I don’t even wanna be around my family, ‘cause I don’t, I haven’t figured out why. You left a place that, you know, was just terrible. Bad things were happening on an hourly basis and, you get to come home, and you’re suppose to be dad, you’re suppose to be husband, and forget all the crap that you saw” (Sanna, 2017).

Others acknowledge how they do not feel relaxed at home as their hypervigilance is more intensified in the civilian world by constantly scanning for danger. Some soldiers cannot even sit with their backs facing a door. O’Byrne summed up his difficulty of readjustment to civilian life by stating, “I’ve built my lifestyle for the last 12 months here getting shot at, you know? So it’s just going to take me time to work that out, you know? And then it’s going to take a while for me to get...if you know what I’m saying. And then finding a job and being happy and all that crap

see a lot of...a lot of worries” (Junger, 2014). In Lioness veteran soldier Vaught additionally expressed,

“In a sense, you’ll always be a soldier. The interesting thing, I’ve found, and I’m sure you have too, you know when you are overseas, and particularly in a time of conflict you think about the things that you’ll tell people when you get back. And then when you get back you can’t do it. And a part of that is because unless you’ve served in a situation like that, you just don’t understand. You can’t understand” (McLagan & Sommers, 2008).

These sentiments expressed by soldiers lead into a larger discussion on the vast differences between civilian and military life and how these differences influence civilian misunderstanding or lack of information on what it means to be in the military.

III. Civilian Misunderstanding

When reflecting on civilian understanding of military life, many soldiers expressed how civilians have little to no understanding about what they do overseas. According to Isaac, “Mom and Dad don’t know what I do. They just don’t. Dad’s well-read and all this shit but he...I can tell him everything but he just...You know he listens, he hears, he doesn’t know” (Rademacher, 2009). Another soldier expressed discontentment towards this gap. He states, “What’s really interesting is that the whole rest of the world is interested in these fuckers [scientologist and celebrities], but they’re so out of touch with our lives. My life has nothing, no similarity with Tom Cruise or whatever.” (Rademacher, 2009). Mitch additionally explains the way Hollywood depicts war is much different than its actuality. He states,

“As a young kid, I followed the other neighbor kids. You had your toy guns and just, we played war. We watched movies, you know, portraying war or whatever, and you just, you think war is glorious... No one ever really knows how they’re gonna react until you’re actually in it. This isn’t what Hollywood makes it out to be” (Sanna, 2017)

Other soldiers state how although civilians may not understand military life it isn’t necessarily their place to know as well. According to Steiner, “I get in scuffles with my family, my

girlfriend, and, you know, when you spend too much time with, you know, your friends, or so on and so forth it's like, well, you'll never understand. It's not your position to understand” (Junger, 2014). Additionally, the women in the Lioness task force faced even more misunderstandings as their roles were not clearly communicated to the public due to the laws in Congress. According to Captain Manning, “I think a lot of the general public certainly know women are over there and know some women have been killed. Probably has no sense at all of the kinds of things we have had women like the Lionesses doing.” (McLagan & Sommers, 2008). She further states, “Women, they’re coming home to a society that really has no idea what they’ve been doing over there” (McLagan & Sommers, 2008). By acknowledging the wide variety of views from a military perspective on the military and civilian communication, one can start mending and improving this gap in communication.

Theme 4: Unbroken Bonds of Comradery

I. Lasting Family Bonds

Throughout each documentary, a strong emphasis was placed on the unbroken bonds between soldiers and their comrades. According to Breslow, “When we were in Iraq, you tell yourself that you’re doing this so that other people can experience what we have. And when you actually go out on missions you’re out there for your peers. It does seem trite. It’s what everybody says all the time. But it really is how most of us feel” (McLagan & Sommers, 2008). These bonds run extremely deep as Steiner states, “You may have your family's blood running through your veins. You know, you didn't shed it with them” (Junger, 2014). Jones reinforces this concept by stating, “You make a conscious decision to say I'm willing to die for this guy. And that's a hell of a statement for a guy you've known two years...I love my wife. I love spending time with her. I like to see my mom. But if I could get on a bird right now and go back,

yeah, I would.” (Junger, 2014). While these soldiers saw combat together, they also helped each other grow as an individual and would spend time together doing normal and carefree civilian activities. Julian states, “But I feel like the people of that unit have helped shaped me. The loving, the funny, the camaraderie that we were able to establish in our team certainly added to the meaning of us being there” (Sanna, 2017). When reflecting back on his time with his comrades Pemble states, “I will never be as close with anybody else in the world, unless I get married someday, or whatever. But I’ll never have that, you know, the bond of friendship, I guess, with anybody else.” (Junger, 2014). Fuji also expresses this unbreakable bond by stating, “Those are the people that you share those time with and you know, you have that connection. You know, you’ve been through those really tough times together, and you know, when you end up on the other side and you have someone to talk to” (Sanna, 2017). As viewers gain a glimpse into the strong bonds created through war, a better understanding of camaraderie may be established. In many of the documentaries, soldiers can be seen either playing music around a campfire together, having impromptu dance parties to lighten the mood, wrestling to bypass time, or simple meeting up after deployment to talk over drinks. In one example, the soldiers from *Restrepo* start playing pop music in the barrack and pull as many of their comrades in as they can to start dancing. As they jump up and down to the beat and wrestle others who try to get away, a lighthearted mood uncommon in the warzone is set; allowing viewers to see a more civilian side to the soldiers who are serving.

Another commonality was the concern for their fellow soldiers above themselves and lasting bonds post war. According to Pemble,

“Every single person that got shot over there, they didn’t worry about themselves one bit. All they asked about was, ‘how are my guys doing?’ Sergeant Rice, when he got hit, he’s like, ‘where’s my team at? Is Solo okay? Is Jackson okay? Is Vandenberg alright,’ you know? When Sergeant Padilla lost his arm, his arm was

missing. He had shrapnel in his face, and he was just asking if everybody was okay, and that...that's bravery.” (Junger, 2014).

Cortez also expressed how despite not caring for his own safety after the loss of his friends in war, he came to his senses when he realized it would also affect his current comrades. He states,

“I started doing what I was supposed to after I got a talk from one of the guys telling me, ‘if you go down, you have to think about the bigger picture.’ There's a possibility that when they come and get me in the open, someone else could get shot. And it just got me thinking. And I started paying attention a bit more and actually started doing the right thing. I wouldn't say I was caring much, but I was just doing it, doing it for them, not for me” (Junger, 2014).

Even after deployment, many soldiers kept in contact; providing support for the lasting implications of war. Bart was one of the many medivac soldiers who suffered from post-trauma after the war. As he became more depressed and suicidal he began reaching out to his good friend Speth; who rallied the medivac team around him to check in on Bart. After receiving multiple calls from his comrades asking him how he was doing and voicing the need for him to get help, Bart states while holding back tears, “It was my brothers, tryin’ to take care of me...that meant a lot” (Sanna, 2017). Mackay also reflected on how his fellow soldiers will always be a part of his life by stating, “These guys out here, I’m going to know them for the rest of my life. When you spend so much time out here with them and you get to know them, they almost become brothers. So it’s great, you have a new family.” (Rademacher, 2009). As civilians listen to and witness the close bonds between the soldiers, an understanding can be developed on why readjustment to civilian life can prove to be difficult when one is used to someone completely understanding their situation and having their back.

II. Loss of a Fellow Soldier

As soldiers become closer through their shared experiences and trusting each other with their lives, the death of a comrade hits close to home. According to McDonough, “When you hear someone's hit, your first reaction is just like, fuck, like, no. And then you start going through your

head all the people that you know out there and wanting to eliminate your friends and the people that were closest to you know, not this guy. Not this guy. Not this guy” (Hetherington & Junger, 2010). In one scene during *Restrepo*, viewers witness a soldier breaking down in the field after he learns his friend has been killed in action just moments before he arrived. As his comrades comfort him, he asks how bad it was and his friends tell him not to look at the body as it is covered. While the soldier is crying and hyperventilating, another soldier places his hand on the back of his head to comfort him. This scene provides a visual of how scarring and difficult losing someone in war can be for a soldier. Additionally, to remember the fallen, many soldiers get remembrance tattoos or wear metal bands with the names of those they have lost. According to Caldwell, “These metal bands right here symbolize and memorialize the people that our company lost...And they will always be with me the rest of my life. And I carry these as a remembrance of them... but this right here means a lot to every soldier within the company... It... it's something I will always remember” (Junger, 2014). Through these scenarios and interviews, viewers may see another side of war many have not before.

Interviewing the soldiers about their fallen friends after the war provided further insight into the emotional side of military life. During his interview, Pemble discusses the loss of his friend, Restrepo; often getting choked up and holding back tears. He states, “And I'm like, who was it? And he's like...he's like, it was Restrepo. And right then I just... I just broke down and started crying right there. It was like... probably just crushed me. It was just pretty bad” (Junger, 2014). Cortez expresses similar feelings by stating, “The brothers we lost actually hit me pretty hard. I think about the guys that went down. And there was a time where actually I didn't care about anything. I didn't care about getting shot or if I died over there” (Junger, 2014). As a captain, Kearney also emphasized the impact losing soldiers has on higher command. He states, “And, you

know, the guys, that's the hardest thing is like, you know, if something happens to me, there's not much I can do about it or anything like that. But it takes a little bit out of you every time you see one of your boys get hurt or you lose one of them. It's really like a big family” (Hetherington & Junger, 2010). By visually seeing the expressions and pain of the soldiers, a more emotional component to the documentary is created and allows viewers to see soldiers in a more vulnerable light.

Theme 5: Lasting Traumas of War and Coping

I. Brutality of War

In the documentaries, the brutality of war is captured through real war footage. As viewers take in these scenes, they are faced with the stark reality that the images they are witnessing actually happened and are not fake or placed there for added effects like in film. Additionally, many of the documentaries do not shy away from the gore of war. Whether it be facing the enemy in combat or tending to the wounded, viewers see bloody limbs, misshaped faces, and the pain of everyone who was affected. While these images may be difficult to view, they allow the audience to have a better understanding as to why soldiers returning home from war have changed. Interviews with the soldiers provide additional insight into the brutality of war. Pemble states,

“Ok, I'll put it this way, like, pretty much every day, we got in a firefight. Every single day, somebody was trying to kill us. Our friends were getting shot next to us. People were...lost their arms, lost their legs. We had our friends get killed. And then, you're thinking in your head, I still have another ten...ten fucking months to go. And, you're like... You're like, pretty much, I never thought I was going to make it out of the valley alive.” (Junger, 2014).

Additionally, Rice recalls a time when he nearly faced death after being directly shot. He states, “Initial thought was, wow, this is the last thing I'm going to see, because the guy was so close. And, you know, the round came in, exploded. Took shrapnel all throughout my body, but... kind

of did--after the explosion, like, I'm still here, I'm still alive, and then proceeded to basically roll down the mountain into the bushes” (Hetherington & Junger, 2010). As soldiers discuss facing death and near-death experiences, viewers can physically see the expressions on the soldiers’ faces which in turn may help form a more concrete connection with the individual.

Attending to the locals was another sensitive matter. Many soldiers expressed how local children would often innocently get involved in crossfires or how the locals were terrified of them. According to Ruthig, “The women were just panic stricken because you know we were supposed to search them. And finally Morgan and I took off our helmets. And once they saw we were females, they started trying to talk to us. I felt like the Gestapo. All’s I could think of was what would I do if they did this to me?” (McLagan & Sommers, 2008). Others expressed the hurt of seeing someone in pain and knowing one must connect with their patients to comfort them but also be detached so it doesn’t jeopardize the mission and their own mental wellbeing. One of the most graphic scenes is a call Fuji heard over the radio about two injured soldiers. According to Fuji,

“As soon as I saw them, I was trying to figure out what part of the patient I was looking at. I could kinda tell it was the head, but he was split open. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a head in that kind of state. I didn’t know a head could look like that. When I had to reposition the casualty, I had to hold his head, and I just remember feeling it, under my gloved hand, you know, that is was soft and almost jelly-like” (Sanna, 2017).

As no vital signs were found and they began laying out the American flag for the deceased, Fuji finds himself wondering if anything else could have been done and if this soldier had a chance to talk to his loved ones before this mission. He states, “I thought of my wife, ‘cause I saw the ring on that one casualty’s finger. And then all the things that those guys aren’t gonna be able to do anymore. Did that guy talk to his loved ones recently or, did...weird thoughts were going through my head but, (pauses), I told everyone that we’re bringin’ in two heroes” (Sanna, 2017).

As Grundy states, “It’s part of our job. We can’t really just be like something bad happened this morning, we’re taking the rest of the day off. We have stuff we have to do, just keep on going with it.” (Rademacher, 2009). By understanding the brutality of war, viewers may begin establishing an understanding of moral injury and post-traumatic stress disorder.

II. Moral Injury

While almost none of the soldiers address moral injury or post-traumatic stress disorder by name, their symptoms and tendency after war point to these mental illnesses. Many soldiers expressed guilt, remorse, or question if they had sinned during their deployment. According to Isaac Rademacher, “I mean, you’re not supposed to involve the emotion. But sometimes it’s unavoidable” (Rademacher, 2009). This often leads soldiers to question their time overseas or decisions they had to make regarding their own company. Chief Warrant Officer Kevin Turner states,

“Being an intel guy here, in an infantry company, I get to know that, when these guys go out on their mission, I know if I give them bad information they might not come back at all. If I gave somebody bad information and they died because of it, I’m the one at fault. I’m the one at fault, you know. I’m the one that has to live with it” (Rademacher, 2009).

Captain Kearny expressed similar sentiments after losing a sergeant major’s son in battle. Kearny stated,

“As soon as it came across the net and said we had a K.I.A. I looked at first sergeant, I was like, it's Vimoto. I just lost the sergeant major's son, the brigade sergeant major's son in my company, the very first day that I go out there and the very first thing I told them to go do, where I'm the only one in charge, and I get his son killed, I was, like... at a loss. I mean, what do I do from here?” (Junger, 2014)

Another soldier voiced concern for his comrade after an intense firefight and the loss of his friend. He stated, “I’m worried about the rest of the guys. They’ve been taking it real bad. Alpha’s kind of blaming it on himself because we couldn’t push over the top, but the thing he’s got to

understand is they fucking--He was dead instantly. There's nothing you can do right there.”

(Hetherington & Junger, 2010). O’Byrne summarizing the feelings surrounding combat and protecting your brothers in arms by stating, “If you fail your job, you're failing everyone in that patrol. Making a mistake and getting someone else killed, that's the biggest fear, that was my biggest fear” (Junger, 2014). Many of the medics additionally expressed feeling guilt for not being able to save a victim or not being able to arrive in time to treat someone. Mitch states,

“Oh that’s one of the worst things we did over there is when you show up and they’re already gone. ‘Cause you just feel like, if I ran a little bit faster, or if we even flew a little bit faster that maybe the outcome would’ve been different. In most cases, it wouldn’t have been. Still didn’t make you really feel any better. I don’t know I just feel guilty. Kinda like fuck, was that my fault? I mean that’s the shit that you never forget, unfortunately.”

The feeling of moral responsibility and guilt for a fellow soldier’s death or not being able to save someone is a side effect of moral injury as soldiers are called to go against their internal moral code. This can continuously be found through the soldiers interviews even though it is not mentioned by name.

Another common side effect of moral injury is the feeling of wrongdoing. Some soldiers even question if God would approve of their actions. According to O’Byrne, “For a while there, I started thinking that God hates me. And that's the terrible thing of war, you know? You do terrible things. And then you have to live with them afterwards. But you'd do them the same way if you had to go back. So what do you do?” (Junger, 2014). O’Byrne continues by elaborating on how he feels there is an “evil thing inside your body” and constantly battles with good versus evil. He states,

“Everyone tells you, you know, you did a honorable thing. You did all right...you did what you had to do. And I just hate that comment. Did what you had to do. 'Cause I didn't have to do any of it. And that's what the fucking thing is. That's the hardest thing to deal with. You know, I didn't have to do shit. I didn't have to go in the army. I didn't have to become airborne infantry. I didn't have to do any of

that. But I did, you know? And, that comment, you did what you had to do, just drives me insane. Because is that what God's going to say? You did what you had to do, good job? Punch you on the shoulder and fucking say, welcome to heaven, you know? I don't think so" (Junger, 2014).

Morgan echoes many of the same feelings as O'Byrne. According to Morgan,

"You can ask any veteran and they will tell you this. When you take another person's life, you kind of like, lose yourself too. I know that God forgives me for everything I do. But you never get over it. You get on with it. And in my eyes, to get over something means you forget about it. And you never forget, or those people over there who have died served for no reason. You don't ever forget." (McLagan & Sommers, 2008).

As each soldier tries to battle with their own internal thoughts, some find comfort in justifying their actions through service. Breslow states, "We just have to have faith in the intel that these people are doing wrong" (McLagan & Sommers, 2008). Guttormsen reinforces this sentiment by stating, "To be honest, it's not really our place to think about it. I am supposed to act out legal orders. So if the President signed a declaration of war, it's my job to do what we're told and execute missions as effectively and efficiently as we possibly can. So I think there's a lot of mixed emotions" (McLagan & Sommers, 2008). Kearny also expresses his thoughts on missions by stating, "And I think that they [the soldiers] can sleep well at night knowing that they did something out there that, you know, wasn't illegal, number one, and they don't have demons inside because of it" (Junger, 2014). These mixed views on moral obligation regarding service can offer viewers a wide perspective on how each soldier should not be labeled the same and moral injury is an individual experience. Although there may be commonalities in war occurrences, how moral injury effects each soldier is personal.

III. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

a. Emotional, Mental, and Physical Symptoms

Post-trauma stress disorder is another commonality throughout the documentaries. While the mental illness is only mentioned by name through interviews with family members and once in passing through an organic video, the side effects are apparent. After having a discussion with her uncle, who served in Vietnam, Morgan stated, “Nobody will ever understand that the people who die in combat are actually the lucky ones. And I don’t know why he [Uncle Glenn] said that, until, like the other day, I kind of realized that they don’t have to remember or try to forget and stuff like that” (McLagan & Sommers, 2008). Guttormsen recalls a specific incident in which she was confronted with the emotional side of war. She states,

“The chief warrant officer at the time came up to me because he saw me giving her a hug and said, remember, you’re in charge, which really bothered me because there is still an emotional side, which I found while I was over in that environment that the women deal with much better than men. I tried not to do it in front of people but I would get teary-eyed when there were bad days. And I would breakdown if there was a bad day. I tried to do it behind closed doors, but you can’t always do that” (McLagan & Sommers, 2008).

For some, the emotional aspect of war was reflected through the innocent victims. According to Fuji, “Certain missions...for me I think it’s the kids. Now I don’t have kids but you kinda, you know that they’re still kinda innocent. I don’t know how to really say it, just you know, they’re young, they don’t know any better. And they’re just helpless, I wanna say kind like that.”

(Sanna, 2017). Bart reflected similar sentiments by stating, “The kids, the local national kids, even as many as I’ve seen it still amazes me and baffles me that they get in the way, and, that the kids are even a part of the equation here. First kid I took care of in Afghanistan was the same age as my son. And, at the time, he was just three years old. And it just, that, it just I don’t know, it

really hit home” (Sanna, 2017). As the soldiers describe their experiences, viewers may see a more emotional side of war often not discussed in the news or by reading articles.

Soldiers additionally described the mental implications of PTSD. According to one soldier, “That kind of wears on you, after a while. I don’t know if anybody could be mentally prepared for that” (Sanna, 2017). According to Mike, the level of preparedness varies from soldier to soldier. He states, “Some of the flight medics came here with very little combat trauma experience. I actually came with a lot. The things that I’ve seen, it’s, it’s indescribable, you can’t ever describe to somebody that didn’t actually see it” (Sanna, 2017). Cortez alludes to the trauma of war and PTSD when he discusses his nightmares. He states, “Actually, I can’t even sleep, honestly. I’ve been on about four or five different types of sleeping pills and none of them helped. That’s how bad the nightmares are. I prefer not to sleep and not to dream about it, than sleep and...just see the picture in my head is...pretty bad” (Hetherington & Junger, 2010). Speth also references the horrors of nightmares by stating,

“What’s goin’ on in your head, what you heard when you were dreamin’ about, doesn’t match what you’re seeing visually and it takes a minute to go, oh, that’s right that was then, this is now and you still have that coiled spring mentality, you know, ‘cause we were always just a coiled spring ready to snap” (Sanna, 2017).

Soldiers also expressed depression, emotions they cannot explain, or signs of suicidal thoughts. According to Bart, “I just felt like I’d no control of anything, there was no control and I didn’t give a shit...and I got to the point on a drive to work where I started thinkin’ about what would happen if I wrecked this car into the embankment next to me? I didn’t care if I lived or died. At that point it didn’t matter to me” (Sanna, 2017). Julian in turn expresses feelings of confusions when trying to sort out his emotions. He states,

“I just remember having these feelings of just, I can’t even really describe it anymore, but just everything hits you at once and you kinda become anxious and go into a little bit of a panic. There was a point where I remember drivin’ home and you know, I just started cryin’ like I didn’t know why...I explained this to the

counselor, I'm like, just everything is hitting me and I don't know what it is, I can't really comprehend what all these feelings are" (Sanna, 2017).

Speth further elaborates on mental implications of PTSD by stating, "Me personally, I have good days and bad days. Some days you'll wake up and you're 10 foot tall and bulletproof man, nothin's gonna stop you, you're ready to take on the world. And then other days it's a fuckin' struggle to get out of bed" (Sanna, 2017). These insights help further identify the ramifications of PTSD and allows viewers to put a face to the mental illness.

Some of the soldiers additionally described exact moments and reactions to having PTSD. During his interview, Speth recalls an incident at home where the trauma of war greatly affected his personal life. While Speth's daughter was jumping on the couch, she fell and bit her lip. As she begins screaming and Speth runs over to her, he experiences a flashback to his time as a medivac. Appearing to hold back tears, he states,

"And she screamed but she's not sayin' anything. Well I'm holdin' her but I smelled hydraulic fluid, my wife's yelling from upstairs 'cause she hears Veronica screaming. But her voice comes across like it's a radio call. I hear the helicopter noises and I'm not in my living room in New York, I'm back in Afghanistan except I'm holding my daughter now in this helicopter" (Sanna, 2017).

As the episode continues Speth explain in that moment he realized he needed additional help. He states, "And it took, it took a while for me to snap outta that I mean I was talking to myself in my head like hey man you're here, this is Veronica, you gotta help her. And you know, she was all right and everything, but it was that moment that I just kinda realized that dude, you can't do this, it's in your head and you need help" (Sanna, 2017). Ruthig also expressed the high tension of returning home specifically when trying to raise her daughter. She states,

"When I first got home, I realized you have a lot of tension and aggression that you didn't have before. There was a time or two I had to apologize to my daughter because she wanted a bowl of cereal. And it didn't fit with what I was doing at that moment. And I probably yelled. I guess I didn't feel I was doing anything right. It's just weird to be a mom and to come back to it like that. What

comes around goes around is a very good expression” (McLagan & Sommers, 2008).

When reflecting on the why soldiers don’t voice symptoms of PTSD earlier Mike states, “Most of us just don’t say anything. And this is the thing that kills me about this job is that the medics tend to just keep doing it for some stupid reason or another. You know, they’d rather not get reset they’d rather keep working” (Sanna, 2017). Additionally, some soldiers feel more comfortable when they are around their comrades who have similar experiences or in combat where they are trained to focus on the task at hand. According to Speth, “Honestly, the most time I’m relaxed is actually in deployments, ‘cause that’s what I’m more comfortable and used to, it’s hard stateside, because you see so much trauma and everything that you go home and you just can’t, you just can’t really get rid of it” (Sanna, 2017). By acknowledging these internal emotional and mental struggles of PTSD, viewers may begin to have a better understanding of what is going through a soldier’s mind post war and the internal war they are facing.

b. Witnessing Death

Witnessing death is another trigger of PTSD. Through each documentary, the soldiers discuss close encounters with death, witnessing the death of the enemy, or losing a close comrade. Morgan recalls one instance where she came face to face with death and had to make the difficult decision whether to shoot. Appearing to hold back tears Morgan states,

“It’s different when you realize I’m pointing a gun at another human being. And like, it was the longest, probably, second of my entire life. I remember thinking so many things...And they told me, if you hesitate, you’re dead...But then I realized, I bet you he’s not caring over there or he wouldn’t be shooting at me. And I got him right in my peeps, you know, and fired and he just dropped. So it’s something you learn to deal with. I’ll never forget any of those times. I don’t regret what I did, but I really wish it would have never happened in that aspect” (McLagan & Sommers, 2008).

Corporal Sniper Mongo expresses similar sentiments by stating, “It feels a little strange when you shoot them. Especially when you watch them when their eyes go white. It’s a little weird, but it’s kind of like if you ever get a tattoo. You get one, you kind of want another”

(Rademacher, 2009). As each soldier voices their experience with death, some reflect on how many soldiers must only deal with what’s in front of them now; otherwise they will jeopardize the mission. When reflecting on how soldiers react to various war experiences, Rice states,

“Unfortunately, there are some people that, they let it get the best of them, and I think that's kind of the big distinguishing thing with fear is how you tolerate or deal with it. Majority of people are able to kind of push it aside and they understand what needs to be done. They can, you know, deal with it later. Unfortunately, there are some that it takes effect of them immediately, and they basically become useless for you.” (Junger, 2014).

As viewers start to understand a soldier’s post-war feelings, the gap between soldiers, veterans, and civilians begins to lessen.

Although some soldiers can push away their emotions momentarily for the mission, many express lasting implications of trauma as they recall their time overseas; especially when losing a close comrade. Sergeant Rice states, “And I think that was what was tough for a lot of people was, you know, kind of knowing that in the back of their mind, well, if the best guy we have out here just got killed, where's that put me? What's going to happen to me? What's going to happen to the guy to my left, to my right?” (Hetherington & Junger, 2010). In a personal interview, Hajar reflects on losing one of his close friends and must ask for the interview to be paused while he collects his thoughts while becoming choked up. He states,

“It was chaos. And when we finally had a second to stop and think, that's when I realized that one of my good friends had gone, you know, and I started hearing about Sergeant Rice, Vandenberg. I didn't even know that they had been hit at that point. And...need a--Yeah, time out. Hold on. I'm just trying to keep my train of thought” (Hetherington & Junger, 2010).

Cortez expresses similar emotions when he talks about seeing one of his sergeants laying on the ground lifeless. He states, “I saw his face, how it was, kind of messed up. I wanted to cry but didn't. I was shocked, honestly. I was shocked because I saw Sergeant Rougle just laying there.” (Hetherington & Junger, 2010). As the soldiers reflect on witnessing the death of their close comrades, many voice how they will never forget these experiences. When referencing the death of his comrade, Hajar states,

“That actually stuck with me for the rest of the deployment. Stuck with me through coming back here to Italy. I still obviously haven't... figured out how to deal with it inside. The only hope I have right now is that eventually I'll be able to process it differently. I'm never going to forget it. Never going to even let go of it. I don't want to not have that as a memory because that was some of the moments that make me appreciate everything that I have” (Hetherington & Junger, 2010).

By hearing accounts of what it means to witness and face death first-hand through physically seeing the raw emotions of the soldiers, viewers may begin to connect with them on a deeper level.

IV. Seeking Medical Help

Although seeking medical help was not deeply voiced in *Restrepo*, *Korengal*, or *Brothers at War*, it did make an important appearance in both *Lioness* and *Trauma*. Seeking medical help when needed is a large hurdle many soldiers face when returning to civilian life. According to Fuji, “No person can go 12 months seeing that [violence and trauma] day in and day out, come out on the other end emotionally as whole as they did going in. You know, from what we see now, what is it, 20-some vets are committing suicide daily, so yeah, definitely keep in touch with people” (Sanna, 2017). Morgan decided to seek mental help after speaking with her uncle who served in Vietnam. She states, “When my uncle told me that he really wished he would have gotten help right after Vietnam, he's seeing the same things in me that it took him over 30 years to deal with, I took his advice and went to the Little Rock VA. I realized that it was okay to have

problems. And it's okay to talk about it" (McLagan & Sommers, 2008). Morgan also expressed the difficulties of adjusting back to her previous life despite seeking help. She states,

"Since Iraq, it's been a long, slow hard haul. It was hard for me because when I came back, I really lost my faith. I started to question a lot of things. America needs to know what's going on over there. That we're over there and we're doing this. This is a new thing for people to realize that their daughters are over there doing the exact same thing that males are doing now" (McLagan & Sommers, 2008).

Mike expresses similar feelings about the returning home from war. He states,

"I don't think I'm getting any better, I just don't think I'm getting' any worse. Every deployment I've had, you know, physical ailments and mental ailments, to be honest with you, and, now it's the point where, okay, well I'm not gonna be in the company...as soon as I came out of the company I had an appointment. When I walked in it was like hey, all bets are off, I'm not flyin' anymore, what do you wanna hear?" (Sanna, 2017).

As he begins therapy, Mike admits a lot of times he didn't open up before because he wanted to continue serving. He states, "And I told her things that I'd never told her before, and I answered any questions she was asking me instead of diverting the subject or dodging the question. She immediately referred me a psychiatrist for an intake for they wanna start puttin' me on meds for, I'm assuming depression and some other stuff" (Sanna, 2017). While some avoid therapy to continue their careers, Nava's father mentioned she avoided therapy out of fear of being labeled. Although Nava did not directly discuss the matter, it shows she was still opening up to her family as she struggles through the symptoms of PTSD such as flashbacks and breaking down. Julian summarizes these feelings by stating,

"Everyone processes everything a little bit differently. I wish we could kinda get in each other's minds and see what other people are thinkin' 'cause a lot of times on the surface, everything is good but I know a lot of guys are hurting on the inside. There are these things that were just put in the back of their minds and, they come up at different times you know, if we haven't really been able to really think about 'em and process 'em, you know, weren't ready to deal with 'em at the time, and now that we're a few years down the road, you know, we still may not be ready to deal with them so, it is a difficult situation" (Sanna, 2017).

As soldiers begin discussing why they either avoid or seek therapy, viewers may begin to understand the internal thought process of soldiers after war.

Some of the soldier delve deeper into either why or how therapy is working for them or realizations they have come to over the course of time. According to Mitch,

“It definitely helps you know, like I’ll have, when I go in and talk to my therapist, whatever, there’ll be some weeks where I mean, we won’t talk about really anything...And then other times where, you start talkin’ about missions in depth and gory detail and, I go to work and I look like I just left a funeral, you know, I’ve just been ballin’ my eyes out for the last hour and the rest of the day you know, once I kinda clear my head, I feel much better. You know, just kinda get it off your shoulders” (Sanna, 2017).

Although therapy helps, Mitch admits it has its ups and downs. He states, “But it just seems like it, it leaves, but then it comes back. You know, it feels good to talk about it but then it just, it keeps coming back. You know, it doesn’t really get any easier. And it’s, for me it’s been like a rollercoaster” (Sanna, 2017). For Mitch, the birth of his son helped him tremendously cope with the trauma of war as he now has something positive to focus on other than his internal struggle.

Bart expresses these same feeling about his family. He states,

“It was realizing that I do have something to live for. My family, mainly. Realizing that if I took my own life, what would that say about all the work I did? I used to say well, all these guys that kill themselves, you know, they’re cowards and all that but, (shakes head) being through what I’ve been through now, I have a lot more empathy for them. And, if I can help even one of ‘em get away from that situation, and prevent them from doing that, well that’s just like continuing the medevac mission, really” (Sanna, 2017).

As each soldier discusses their personal journey with therapy, many acknowledge it is still a work in progress. When reflecting on his deployment Mike states, “But I know it’s affected me adversely. I’m still like muddling through it. It didn’t hurt as much for others but, regardless, one way or the other, it’s gonna affect you the rest of your life. I’m not sure exactly what the future holds but I hope it gets a little bit better. I’ll keep workin’ at it” (Sanna, 2017). By understanding

a soldier's personal experience with therapy, the stereotype of soldiers being unphased by war can be broken and a better communication channel about war mental illnesses can be opened.

Discussion

After analyzing and categorizing the results from *Restrepo*, *Korengal*, *Lioness*, *Brothers At War*, and *Trauma*, the major take aways were the how soldiers are civilians at heart and how documentaries can bridge communication between military personnel and civilians without creating uncomfortable scenarios. Often held to high standards and idolized for their patriotism, many times soldiers have difficulty adjusting back to civilian life especially when there is limited understanding of their responsibilities overseas. The enforcement of the brave and unaffected soldier can be traced back far into history. To condense the study, the instance of Nixon and the suppression of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) will be analyzed. According to Parry-Giles, “[p]rior to the rise of the VVAW, both the Johnson and Nixon administrations had effectively portrayed war protesters as unpatriotic rich kids from college campuses who were merely acting out against authority and lacking in genuine conviction” (Parry-Giles, 2010, p. 170). As veterans began to speak out against the war, “[t]he presence in Washington of Vietnam veterans protesting against the war significantly undermined the image of the antiwar movement” (p. 171). Playing upon the stereotypes of soldiers and veterans the public perceived as socially acceptable, the Nixon administration was able to squash the opposition by attacking the soldiers’ credibility and loyalty to their country by specifically targeting the leader of the VVAW, John Kerry (Parry-Giles, 2010). The media, such as the Detroit News, Newsday, and Boston Evening Globe further discredited Kerry claiming he was a fraud, privileged, and aspired to be the next John F. Kennedy (Parry-Giles, 2010). According to Parry-Giles “[t]he themes of patriotism and sacrifice for one’s country permeated the anti-VVAW discourse of the Nixon administration and its allies” (p. 174). By watching documentaries regarding soldier life, viewers

can gain additional insight on what it means to be a soldier and see the raw emotions of both celebratory and catastrophic times.

Utilizing fantasy-theme theory, cultivation theory, and symbolic convergence theory, one can begin to have a better understanding of how documentaries can influence social perception. According to Bormann (1972), fantasy-theme theory explains how when groups begin to relate on core commonalities and shared experiences, their shared experiences allow them to feel connected to others who may have experienced similar situations. Cultivation theory in turn analyzes states that “those who spend more time watching are more likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most common and recurrent messages of the world of fictional television” (Mastro, D. & Tukachinsky, R., 2012, p. 337). Finally, according to Bormann (1985), symbolic convergence theory “creates a symbolic climate and culture that allows people to achieve empathic communication” and understand other people’s point of views (p. 134). These theories can provide valuable insight into soldiers’ lives without having to ask a soldier or veteran personal questions about their service that could cause more harm than good.

Documentaries can create a unique and insightful way to bridge the military and civilian communication gap by fostering feeling of empathy and understanding for those who have served their country. According to Ryan (2015), “oral history, and the relationships between the oral historian and narrator developed through it, can serve as a bridge for communication scholars, deepening our understanding of why humans communicate life stories and meanings found in those tales” (p. 90). Documentaries serve as a modern form of storytelling in which “thick dialogue is transformed in the public sphere through documentary and multimedia storytelling into thick vision” acting as a “way to bring the understanding of the oral history conversation into the larger public sphere...to deepen the audience’s understanding of the story”

through both the narrator's words and visual representation (p. 93). By utilizing the storytelling aspect of documentaries as a platform to educate civilians about military life, a better understanding can be established, and proactive steps can be taken to help reintroduce soldiers and veterans more easily into civilian life.

RQ 1: What common themes are established through the military lens of soldier and veteran perspectives?

The first research question, what common themes are established through the military lens of soldier and veteran perspectives, establishes the framework to apply fantasy-theme theory, cultivation theory, and symbolic convergence theory. Five themes were found throughout the documentaries; understanding military life and sacrifice, relations with the locals, adjustment to civilian life and the communication gap, unbroken bonds of comradeship, and finally lasting traumas of war and coping. Each theme focuses upon a key aspect of soldier and military life; allowing viewers a broader picture of what it truly means to serve for one's country. As viewers may feel they are personally going through a soldier's journey alongside comrades through specific camera angles, witnessing horrific scenes, and seeing moments of laughter and friendship when spending time with comrades, a humanistic side of war is shown, and the restitution narrative and chaos narrative is broken. According to Murphy (2008), soldiers are often categorized in either a restitution narrative or chaos narrative in which soldiers and veterans are seen as individuals who permanently overcome mental illness or are constantly driven mad by their war experiences. In both *Lioness* and *Trauma*, soldiers discuss how struggling with mental illness is a constant battle and although the trauma endured may be permanent, they are still trying to live a normal life. As Mike stated in *Trauma*, "I don't think I'm getting any better, I just don't think I'm getting any worse" (Sanna, 2017). Soldiers also

expressed how many times it was their comrades or family members who served in the war who convinced them to go to therapy. According to Morgan in *Lioness*, “When my uncle told me that he really wished he would have gotten help right after Vietnam, he’s seeing the same things in me that it took him over 30 years to deal with, I took his advice and went to the Little Rock VA. I realized that it was okay to have problems. And it’s okay to talk about it” (McLagan & Sommers, 2008). This theme in turn expressed a soldier and veteran’s desire to be involved in their own mental health.

In a study conducted by Howren, Cozad and Kaboli (2015) in a survey of 315 veterans 47.3% believed it was their responsibility to contact Veteran Affairs and non-VA providers for needed help. Although many soldiers in the documentaries *Trauma* and *Lioness* expressed they realized they needed help when talking with their families or fellow soldiers, they accepted the responsibility of seeking help as their own. Many times, the phrase “I realized I needed help” was used when discussing therapy. The usage of the word “I” shows personal acceptance of responsibility and therefore enforced the notion soldiers need and want to be a part of their health care. Although many soldiers excluded words such as “PTSD” and “moral injury”, the symptoms they described such as nightmares, flashbacks, and feelings of remorse all point towards these two mental illnesses. Due to the nature of documentaries being a one-way channel of communication, it could not officially be determined why the soldiers chose to emit these terms. In one statement, Nava’s father mentioned she often feared being labeled. From previous research conducted by Ma and Nan (2018), mental illness stigma can cause barriers which prevent people from seeking treatment, employment opportunities, and human interactions. This could be the reason why the soldiers chose to emit these terms due to mental illness stigmas.

Another concept challenged in the documentary was the “broken hero” concept (Phillips, 2015). While some soldiers talked about their personal mental illnesses within the documentaries, others merely discussed their war experiences. Having a wide variety of soldier and veteran perspectives additionally showed not all soldiers cope or express their experiences in war the same way. According to Julian in *Trauma*, “Everyone processes everything a little bit differently” (Sanna, 2017). In *Restrepo* and *Korengal* specifically, some soldiers expressed feelings of remorse or guilt for their actions while others believed their soldiers could go home without feeling they had inner demons. For example, according to O’Byrne, “For a while there, I started thinking that God hates me. And that's the terrible thing of war, you know? You do terrible things. And then you have to live with them afterwards. But you'd do them the same way if you had to go back. So what do you do?” (Junger, 2014). Captain Kearney, however, had a different perspective. Kearney states, “And I think that they [the soldiers] can sleep well at night knowing that they did something out there that, you know, wasn’t illegal, number one, and they don’t have demons inside because of it” (Junger, 2014). By challenging the typical restitution and chaos narrative, viewers can begin to see a deeper level of soldier life and how they perceive their service.

Through fantasy-theme theory, viewers can begin to realize that at heart many of these soldiers are like themselves and could be easily be a next-door neighbor, a close friend, brother or sister. According to Bormann (1972), “when group members respond emotionally to the dramatic situation they publicly proclaim some commitment to attitude” (p.397). By realizing the core of what it means to be a soldier, viewers can have a better understanding of what is happening overseas and can relate on a personal level. While civilians may never serve overseas, seeing and listening to people who have experienced these occurrences lessens the gap of

misunderstanding especially since documentaries catalog actual events. The firefights are real, the gore is real, and the people are real. According to a study conducted by McWilliam and Bickle (2017), veterans and soldiers viewed digital storytelling as a way to bridge understanding between soldiers and civilians and pass important knowledge on to other generations. This study acknowledges how documentaries can serve as a useful channel of communication between military personnel and civilians without direct interaction. By understanding the daily life of a soldier and acknowledging its actuality, viewers can begin to relate to the struggles of soldiers on a personal level.

As fantasy theory focuses on individualized feelings, cultivation theory takes into consideration the feelings or thoughts developed by society (West & Turner, 2010). In cultivation theory, what viewers consistently see on television or in the media is how they perceive actuality (Mastro, D. & Tukachinsky, R., 2012). These can be seen through the five themes found in the documentaries. The five themes established add more complexity and dimension to soldier lives and show how previous narratives are limited. While many soldiers alluded to the traumas of war and express seeking help, there are various stages of coping with the trauma of war. Although some feel they are at a standstill, others are still in the process of working out their emotions. Morgan explains, “Since Iraq, it’s been a long, slow hard haul. It was hard for me because when I came back, I really lost my faith. I started to question a lot of things. America needs to know what’s going on over there” (McLagan & Sommers, 2008). Additionally, some soldiers do not reference lasting traumas of war and merely talk about their experiences. For example, Sergeant Rice recalls a trauma experience in which he was shot and almost killed, however, he never voices how it affected him later in life. Instead he states, “After the explosion, like, I’m still here, I’m still alive, and then [I] proceeded to basically roll down the

mountain into the bushes” (Hetherington & Junger, 2010). These examples and documentaries showcase how war experience is a personal journey and cannot be lumped into the stereotypically war hero narrative. Themes, however, bring these individualized experiences together, to establish a society understanding of what it means to be a soldier. By having established, repetitive themes in multiple documentaries, viewers’ perspective on soldiers can shift to a more realistic representation rather than a dramatized movie narrative as seen on television. It is here where cultivation theory truly comes into play as according to West and Turner (2010) “television’s major function is to stabilize social patterns, to cultivate resistance to change” (p. 381). As realistic expectations of soldier life and a knowledge on military struggles become destigmatized in documentaries and in the media, the gap between military personnel and civilians can begin to close. Since “most people get their information from mediated sources rather than through direct experience”, documentaries create the perfect setting for civilians to learn about and understand soldier life without living through the experience themselves (West & Turner, 2010, p. 379). By using documentaries as a bridge for civilians to communicate and interact with soldiers in a more thoughtful and proactive manner, the hope is for the documentary to resonant with “a viewer’s lived reality” so it “coincides with the reality pictured in the media” (p. 384). For this reason, depicting accurate representations of soldier and veteran lives is crucial as it can serve as a steppingstone to reshaping society’s perceptions of soldiers to be more accepting of mental illness, internal struggles, and war experiences.

Finally, symbolic convergence theory explains the empathetic implications of communication and group conscious. According to Bormann (1985), symbolic convergence theory allows researchers to categorize shared experiences using symbolic cues. As the soldiers in the documentaries discuss similar experiences and common themes begin to form, a group

consciousness is created. This in turn opens the opportunity for viewers to partake in group consciousness as well. Since humans are naturally inclined to “social storytelling” and narratives, documentaries create a visual storyline to follow and enable viewers to create connections with those on the screen to their own experiences. Although viewer insight was not measured following the documentaries, natural inclinations towards storytelling and sharing group experiences through social cues such as emotions, body language, and key words would suggest a group conscious between the soldiers in the documentaries and the viewers could be formed. According to Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and Pereira-Fariña (2017), interactive documentaries “built with the integration of diverse textual and audiovisual elements, graphics, maps, and computer-generated environment”, can help an audience connect on a deeper level as they must proactively react to what is being shown (p. 408). This can be accomplished through the various “Interrotron” angles used in the documentaries analyzed in which the soldier appears as if they were talking to the audience; encouraging the social norm of making eye contact with the individual when they are speaking and creating a deeper bond. Another aspect which was implemented was the sounds of war. As viewers watch the documentary, sounds of weapons firing, bombs launching, and soldiers shouting can be loudly heard and at times the only sound within the documentary. This can help further grab the viewer’s attention and pull them into the concept being explained as both visual and audio elements are engaged; adding to the interactive aspect of the of the documentary.

Each documentary was additionally analyzed for outside forums to discuss the content of the documentaries and follow up questions pertaining to soldier life. Unfortunately, only *Brothers At War* included a website viewers could reference after watching the documentary. It appeared to be inactive though as an error message regarding Adobe Flash popped up despite all

Adobe Flash software being up to date on the computer. Having a platform where military personnel and civilians could discuss the documentaries or share common stories could further bridge the communication gap between these individuals and create an open forum for discussion. Although these forums may need to be monitored to avoid insensitive comments about soldier life and returning home, it opens the opportunity to answer questions civilian may have after watching the documentary. By establishing themes within the documentaries and utilizing fantasy-theme theory, cultivation theory, and symbolic convergence theory as a guide, civilians can start making connections to their own lives and see a soldier's perspective from a more personal level.

RQ 2: How do military documentaries offer personal insight into soldier and veteran lives?

The second research question, how do military documentaries offer personal insight into soldier and veteran lives can, also be answered through fantasy-theme theory, cultivation theory, and symbolic convergence theory. As viewers gain inside knowledge and both hear and see the struggles, tribulations, and trials soldiers face, this one-on-one communication channel begins to establish a bond between the viewer and interviewees. According to fantasy-theme theory, individuals will naturally begin comparing their own lives to those who are featured in the documentary (Mastro, D. & Tukachinsky, R., 2012). In this research, this would be accomplished by either knowing someone in the military, relating what is seen to a viewer's own family experience and the soldier's experience, or reacting to emotional cues from soldiers to participate in the one-way communication process. By listening to a soldier's personal perspectives on what their military service means to them and their daily responsibilities, viewers may take part in a one-way communication between soldiers, veterans, and civilians through the documentary.

As viewers start to establish these bonds, the viewer may begin to see the soldier's personal experiences are similar to their own or relate it to what they know about military life. This in turn, according to fantasy-theme theory, creates more empathy for the soldiers as viewers witness up-close and personal what it means to be a soldier and connect on a deeper level to narratives. According to Ryan (2015), oral story telling helps to establish relations and can "serve as a bridge for communication". Visuals additionally add to this narrative as well as the use of "The Interrotron" during soldier interviews. Williams (2014) explains how using specific camera angles "enables interview subjects to look directly into the camera and therefore directly at the spectator or the film" to create a more personal and direct experience (pg. 58). Each documentary analyzed utilizes this concept when interviewing soldiers outside of the war zone; often with a close-up frame capturing just their shoulders on up. This created the illusion of the viewer sitting in front of the soldier and speaking with them directly. At times, however, many soldiers avoiding looking directly into the camera when discussing traumatic or scarring experiences. By having a visual representation and being able to see soldier emotions and reactions from a more personal perspective, a group conscious can be formed which in turn can be analyzed through symbolic convergence theory.

As viewers may watch the facial expressions of soldiers during their interviews, symbolic convergence theory can help to explain why some viewers may feel emotionally attached to the soldier's reactions. According to Bormann (1985), nonverbal cues or emotions "may arouse tears or evoke anger, hatred, love, and affection as well as laughter and humor" (p. 132). Symbolic convergence theory allows scholars to explain why viewers may have such strong reactions to people's emotions or non-verbal cues. To analyze the relationship between people's emotional reactions and documentaries, one can analyze studies on the similarities and differences between

face-to-face (FTF) interaction and computer-mediated communication (CMC). Studying the “naturalness” of communication, five components of FTF interaction are used as the guide for CMC: “collocation; synchronicity of communication flow; and the capacity to express and perceive facial expressions, body language, and speech” (Vlahovic, Roberts, & Dunbar, 2012, p. 437). Using these components as a comparison, Vlahovic, Roberts, and Dunbar found CMC offers “alternative means of managing social relationships that might relax the constraints on FTF interactions” (Vlahovic et al., 2012, p. 436). Looking at documentaries both as a FTF interaction, due to the visual component, and a CMC interaction, due to its digital formatting, one can conclude from Vlahovic, Roberts, and Dunbar study that CMC component may relax the constraints of in person communication with a soldier. By watching a documentary and being able to freely react on their own accord without worry about the other person’s reactions, civilians may be more open to show raw emotion instead of trying to focus on not being rude or over reactive to the soldier. More research would need to be conducted to see if in person communication with soldier and veterans had a less, equal, or greater impact on civilian feelings towards soldier and veteran narratives than visual digital platforms such as documentaries.

Cultivation theory in turn shapes the overall perspective on soldiers and veterans. Since media plays a crucial role in shaping society’s views and perspectives, documentaries can alter civilian perspectives on the damaging stereotypes of soldiers often shown in films (West and Turner, 2010). As people see and hear about soldier experiences outside the pre-existing stereotypes of being unaffected by war and instead see military personnel showing emotion and talking about their trauma, viewer’s current perspective of soldiers can change; allowing for more open and honest communication between the two groups. As social perception through media begins to change, the hope is to further discover effective ways to help soldiers and

veterans seek help when needed and to feel inclusive. Documentaries can offer a start to obtaining a better understanding of the needs of soldiers and creating a more welcoming and understanding environment when dealing with the aftermath of war instead of making assumptions off previous media which may or may not be factual. The more factual documentaries are broadcasted to civilians, the more likely civilians will normalize these perspectives in accordance with cultivation theory. Understanding and breaking the damaging stereotypes shown in war movies and instead replacing these with realistic perceptions is the first step in bridging the communication gap between soldiers and veterans as the Pew Research survey showed seventy-one of civilians agreed they had little to no understanding of military life (Ukman, 2011). As society begins to see soldiers in a more humanistic light and understand their daily responsibilities, the gap between military personnel and civilians can begin to close and the fantasy created by films is diminished.

RQ 3: Based on the common themes established, what proactive steps can civilians take to better soldier, veteran, and civilian communication?

Based on the common themes established, what proactive steps can civilians take to better soldier, veteran, and civilian communication? As viewers may connect to the documentaries on a personal level and understand soldier perspectives, fantasy-theme theory, cultivation theory, and symbolic convergence theory can help enact change. Through the documentaries, many soldiers expressed how civilians simply do not understand their lives; which in turn leads to a communication gap between military personnel and civilians. In an interview with his brother, Isaac Rademacher states, “Mom and Dad don’t know what I do. They just don’t. Dad’s well-read and all this shit but he...I can tell him everything but he just...You know he listens, he hears, he doesn’t know” (Rademacher, 2009). Steiner reflects similar

sentiments by stating, “I get in scuffles with my family, my girlfriend, and, you know, when you spend too much time with, you know, your friends, or so on and so forth it’s like, well, you’ll never understand. It’s not your place to understand” (Junger, 2014). Using these statements and countless others as a guide for how soldiers feel about the understanding gap between soldiers and civilians, the bridge between these two starkly different lives can be formed. As expressed by Ma and Nan (2018), since society is naturally inclined to storytelling, narratives serve to open communication (in this case between soldiers, veterans, and civilians) and understanding mental illnesses. Additionally, documentaries providing a crucial visual element of the trauma and scenarios soldiers may endure during war and can serve as a way for civilians to learn about soldier life and war trauma at large without directly questioning a soldier on topics they may not want to openly discuss in person or with someone they barely know. According to PTSD Speaks Out! (2017), it is important to take into consideration a soldier may not want to openly discuss their war experiences and if a soldier does have PTSD certain questions can trigger symptoms. This difficulty in communication can be overcome by utilizing documentaries to gain basic knowledge on military life from soldiers who have agreed in advance to talk about their experiences for the documentary. According to Borinstein (1992), “before the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period when many patients in mental institutions were deinstitutionalized, the topics of mental health in general and persons with mental illness in particular also were of limited concern to the public” (p. 186). Considered a “private matter” is was most “often treated by individuals and families...except, perhaps, medical professionals and other family members” (p.186). As time and views on mental illness have changed, analyzing documentaries through a cultivation theory lens enables future researchers to see the impact documentaries have on

cultural norms regarding soldier and veteran military life and how it can help open communication between civilians and military personnel.

Fantasy-theme theory comes into play further when civilians can start relating their own experiences to those of soldiers and enact change. As this bond becomes established, the dissonance between civilians and military personnel is closed which in turn can lead to action. According to Bormann (1972) an individual's tendency towards rhetorical visions or relating their own personal experiences together, often enacts change. If civilians can establish a better understanding for military personnel and their external and internal war, they could be more equipped to create safe spaces for veterans or avoid reinforcing damaging stereotypes such as dismissing mental illness or viewing someone with a mental illness as incompetent. As individuals become more aware of soldier and veteran lives, this can transition into society through cultivation theory. The more people regularly see images or a specific way of life on a screen, they more likely are to perceive it as the norm (West & Turner, 2010). By introducing documentaries where soldier talk about mental illness, are seen showing emotion, and offer insight into how they are still at heart civilians, the stoic images of soldier unaffected by war or the "crazed" veteran will begin to change and people can have a more accurate representation on what it means to be a soldier. As these images of soldiers become the norm, a more welcoming and understanding society for soldiers returning home can be created and may encourage soldiers and veterans to seek help as needed since the fear of stigma and labels will not be as prominent. According to Corrigan, Druss, and Perlick (2014) "studies have shown that knowledge, culture, and social networks can influence the relationship between stigma and access to care" (para. 6). In addition, "cultural factors can influence the types of behaviors that are thought to violate social norms and the degree to which discrimination against people who display

nonconformative behavior is accepted” (para. 6). Corrigan, Druss, and Perlick further explain “social networks, including family members, friends, and coworkers, can also have a big impact on people’s decisions to pursue treatment, serving either to enhance feelings of stigma or to encourage care seeking” (para. 6). By creating a more welcoming home and societal environment, perhaps soldiers and veterans won’t feel as alone and can begin making strides towards rebuilding the lives they left behind to serve their country. Due to “the impact of knowledge, culture, and networks on people’s decisions to access care, many public-health and policy initiatives meant to encourage care usage have focused on educating people about mental health to combat harmful stereotypes related to illness and treatment” (para. 7). By “addressing cultural barriers to care and including supportive networks in treatment plans [which] can also encourage treatment”, this can in turn bridge the communication gap between civilians and military personnel (para. 7).

Symbolic convergence theory can further help enact change as group conscious can create empathetic communication (Bormann, 1985). If civilians start to interpret and connect soldier narratives to their own personal lives through shared emotions, empathy can be established which in turn can promote the use of trauma sensitive language. According to PTSD Speaks Out! (2017) the way civilians talk to soldiers is as equally important as trying to learn about their experiences. Using phrases such as “How many enemies did you kill?” can offset a soldier’s PTSD and moral injury symptoms; causing further harm to their healing process (PTSD Speaks Out!, 2017). Others may prefer not to talk about their experiences and PTSD Speaks Out! suggests for family, friends, and acquaintances to allow military personnel to take the lead on talking about their experiences so not to cross any personal boundaries or trigger any unwanted memories. Additionally, the organization voices the importance of allowing a soldier or veteran

to know you are available to talk if needed and then to listen and be understanding if the soldier or veteran may become angry, frustrated, or does not want to continue the discussion. If civilians have a base understanding of war life through watching documentaries and could establish an understanding of PTSD and moral injury symptoms, they could establish traumatic sensitive language and, if presented the opportunity, encourage a soldier or veteran to seek professional help without imposing or offending the individual.

By utilizing documentaries as a channel to learn about soldier life, a broader audience could be reached as documentaries can reach the masses quickly if placed on the correct network channels. According to Pew Research study conducted by Rainie (2017), “59% of U.S. adults say cable connections are their primary means of watching TV, while 28% cite streaming services and 9% say they use digital services” (para. 3). By understanding the most popular platforms in which to reach a large number of civilians, documentaries can be placed on these key channels to promote learning about soldier and veteran life. These could be played on major soldier and veteran holidays such as Veterans Day and the Fourth of July, or Memorial Day to honor both the living and the fallen soldiers. This may encourage more viewership of these documentaries as the holidays may bring thoughts of soldiers and veterans to the forefront of civilian minds. More research would need to be done on how to encourage civilians to actively seek documentaries to learn about soldier and veteran life; especially if they do not have a stake in the topic such as knowing someone who has served. By closely analyzing how and why civilians seek out military documentaries, a better understanding of how to reach the civilian demographic can be established and the communication gap between military personnel and civilians can be further closed. This in turn create a safe environment for civilians to learn about

military life without crossing boundaries in hopes of creating a understanding and welcoming society for soldiers and veterans to return to after war.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include the absence of Air Force and Navy military perspectives, viewers reactions to the documentaries, and the lack of an interactive communication channel at the end of each documentary. Due to the nature of studying documentaries, the researcher also could not ask follow-up questions to the soldier's responses if clarification was needed. The absence of Air Force and Navy soldiers in documentaries could be because they see less close combat action than Marines, the Army, and Medivac. By acknowledging the limitations within the study, further research can be conducted to close these gaps.

Further Research

Additional research on this topic would include conducting interviews with a variety of viewers on the how the documentaries impacted them personally or helped their understanding of military life. Another study could focus on analyzing documentaries which include soldiers from different countries to see how their experiences compare or differ from American soldiers. It could also be explored if how society constructs social norms around discussing jobs directly effects communication with those who may have a career or calling which includes life or death scenarios. Another aspect which could be analyzed is if trauma, PTSD, and moral injury affect men and women soldiers differently and if one group has better coping mechanisms due to societal norms of masculinity versus femininity. Finally, further discussion on PTSD from various trauma backgrounds could be explored such as if PTSD has a correlation with police officers and police brutality, or how does discussing soldier PTSD open discussion about other PTSD experiences such as domestic abuse, child abuse, or traumatic experiences.

In the future, I would like to continue reaching this topic by including participant reactions to the documentaries to measure the impact on individual and social perceptions. Additionally, my hope is to work with mental health professionals and the Veteran Affairs to bridge the understanding between soldier and civilian experience. This will in turn change how soldier healthcare is portrayed and to find a more effective way to include both military personnel and civilians in the healthcare process to encourage seeking help when needed and breaking damaging soldier mental illness stereotypes.

Conclusion

Documentaries provide critical insight into the communication gap between military personnel and civilians. By analyzing the five documentaries through a fantasy-theme theory, cultivation theory, and symbolic analysis lens, viewers can understand the deeper underlying connections between visual and audio communication. As documentaries provide additional insight into soldier and veteran lives, one can begin to adjust their social perspective and language to be more inclusive of those returning home from war. Whether it be acknowledging soldiers have more emotional dimensions than the classic stoic figures shown in war movies or should be considered brave when opening up about their mental illnesses, creating a more accepting society can further bridge the gap between military and civilian communication and provide a learning curve to those just starting to learn about soldier and veterans without inflicting permanent damage. Digital storytelling not only has the capability to reach a wide array and quantity of people but when utilized from a narrative perspective it also enables viewers to have an emotional connection to the content which can be analyzed through fantasy-theme theory, cultivation theory, and symbolic convergence theory. By having a baseline understanding of documentaries and gaining insight into the actuality of war, perhaps civilians can take the first step in creating a more inclusive environment for America's soldiers serving overseas and returning home.

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Biography

Marie Mikols was born January 15th in Allentown, Pennsylvania. She earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree from Moravian College in English and a double minor in Business Management and Media. By completing her thesis, she now has a Master of Arts in Communication with a focus in Corporate and Non-Profit. Throughout her academic career and research, she has strongly focused on soldier and veteran mental health, military stigmas, and finding ways to bridge misunderstandings about the military. Her hope is to continue educating the public about ways to help military personnel return to civilian life and positively change the social perceptions and structures in place for military mental health.